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XBN

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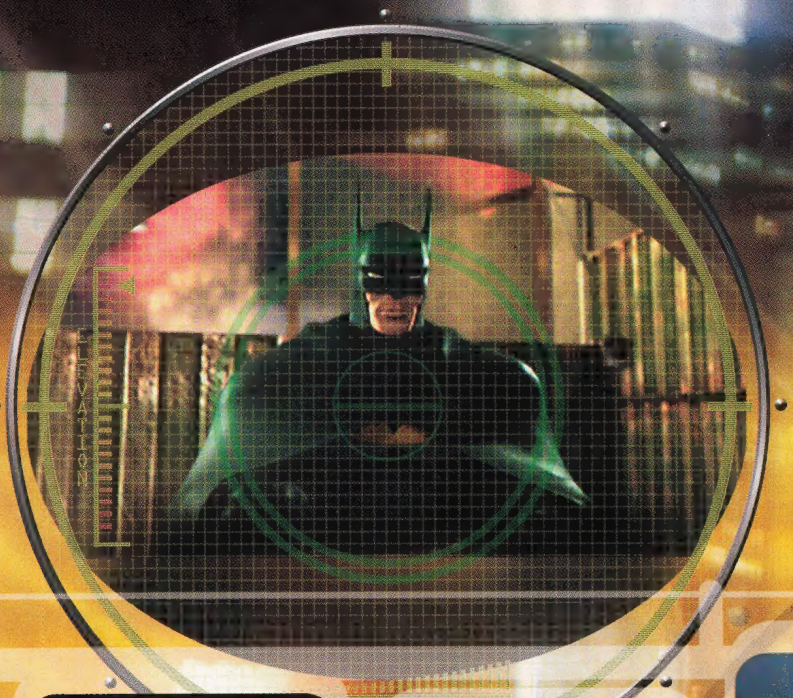

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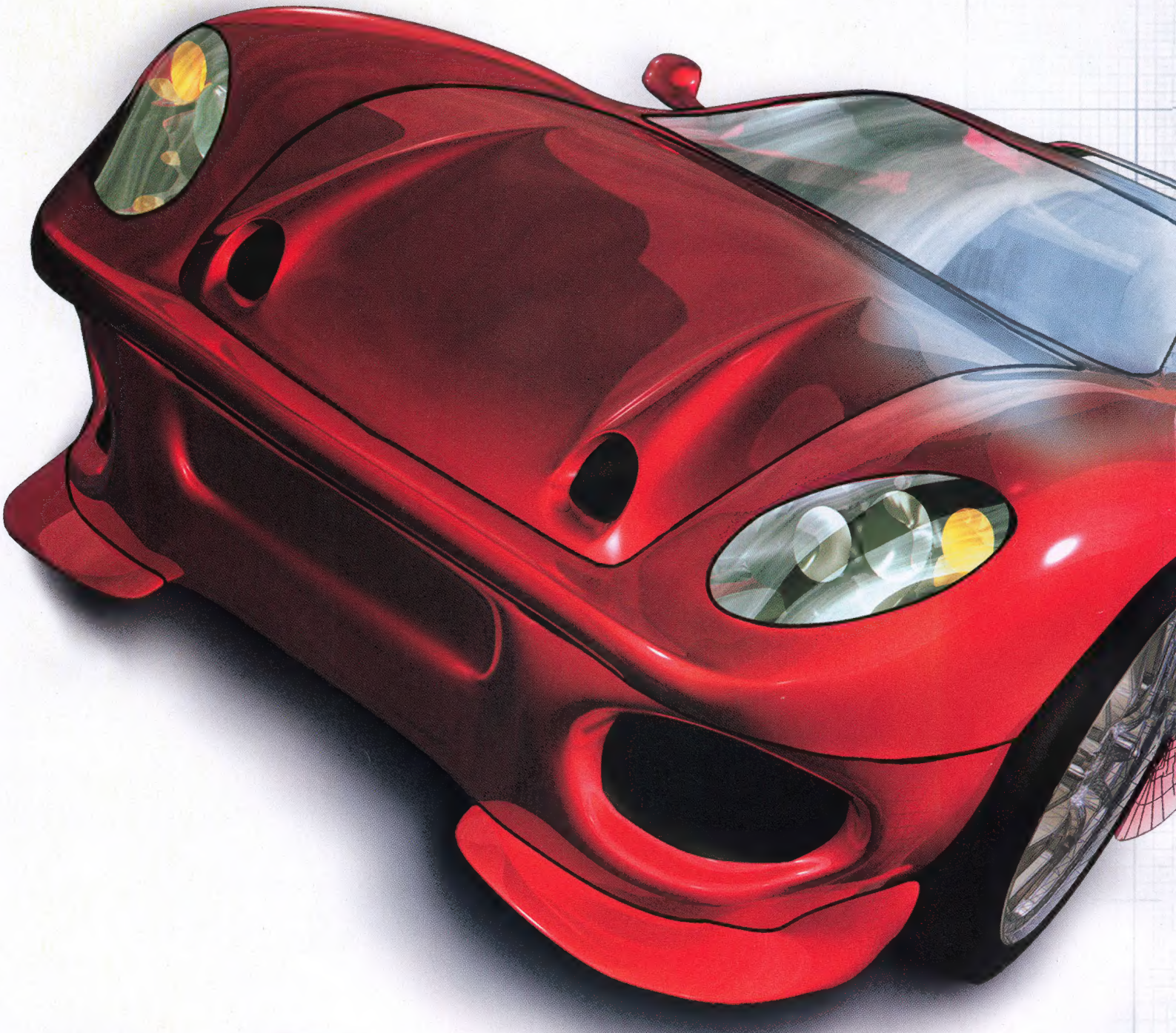

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XBOX

ONLY ON XBOX

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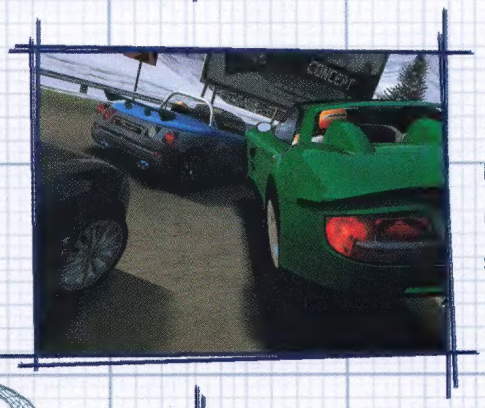

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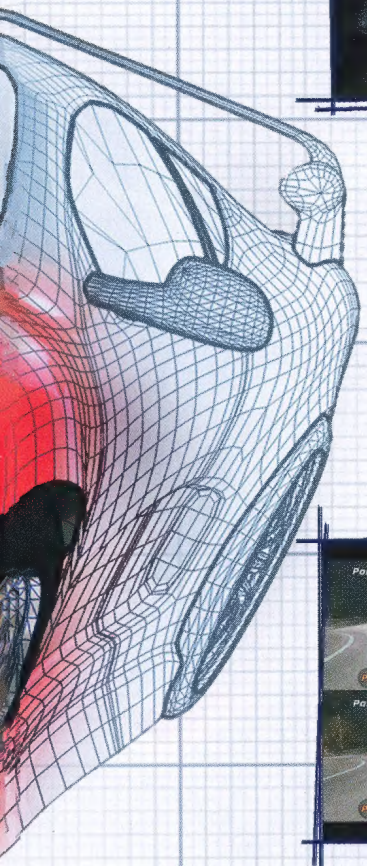

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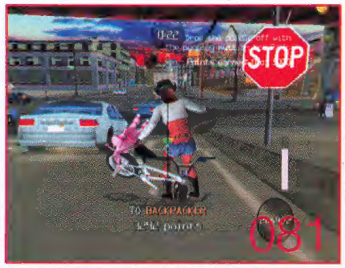
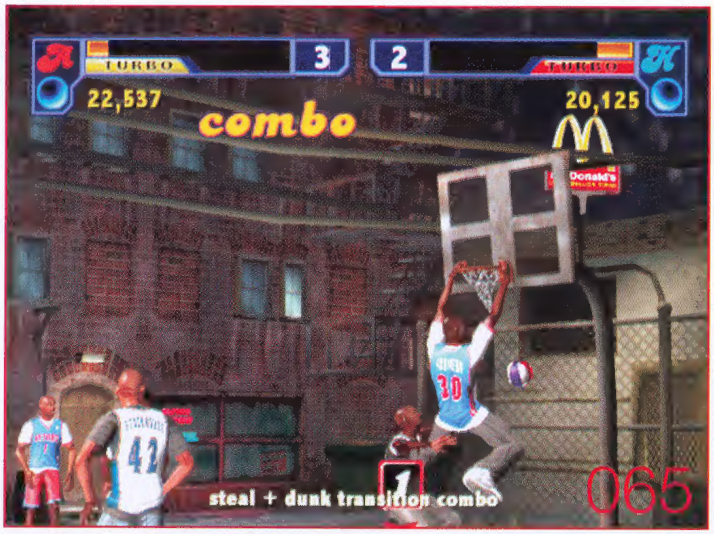
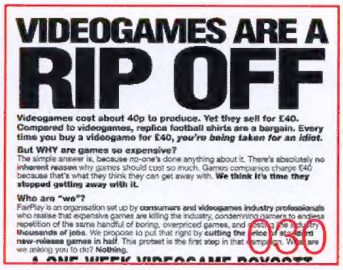






VIDEOGAMES ARE A RIP OFF

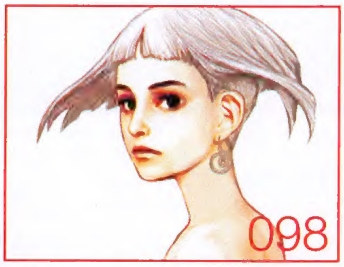
Videogames cost about 40p to produce. Yet they sell for £40. Compared to videogames, replica football shirts are a bargain. Every time you buy a videogame for £40, *you're being taken for an idiot.*

But WHY are games so expensive?
The simple answer is, because no-one's done anything about it. There's absolutely no **inherent reason** why games should cost so much. Games companies charge £40 because that's what they think they can get away with. **We think it's time they stopped getting away with it.**

Who are "we"?
FairPlay is an organisation set up by **consumers and videogames industry professionals** who realise that expensive games are killing the industry, condemning gamers to endless repetition of the same handful of boring, overpriced games, and **costing the industry thousands of jobs.** We propose to put that right by **cutting the price of standard new-release games in half.** This protest is the first step in that campaign. You are asking you to do? **Nothing.**

A ONE WEEK VIDEOGAME BOYCOTT

036



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PIXELATION NATION

How I learned to stop worrying...

...and love the Xbox.

Like Bill Gates after an especially strenuous match of "Buy That Continent," Microsoft's initial entry into the console war has taken its share of bumps and bruises. Attempting to follow the unhinged magnificence of *Halo*, the first-party lineup has had a difficult time keeping up; *Blinx* weeps at the heels of *Mario Sunshine*, and *Whacked!* is what oblivious gangsters get. The situation has been dire concerning RPGs, fighting games, and the hernia one might incur upon lifting the console without the assistance of a large crane.

And yet the fact is now plain to see: love it or hate it, Microsoft is here to stay. Its big black box (and the line of black boxes sure to follow) will play a massive role in the development of the medium.

There are now multiple flashes of brilliance in the Xbox lineup. *Steel Battalion* is the closest thing there is to mass-market virtual reality, while the real-time voice chat of Xbox Live is the single most significant advance for digital interactivity in the past decade. As steps are taken towards persistent gaming worlds and streaming content, the con-sole's hard drive finally begins to make sense; the sheer customizability and storage it allows is only beginning to be properly utilized.

Given the current rigid state of the console industry, Microsoft may in fact be one of the only companies large enough to actually push things forward. It can afford to take risks, and must if it hopes to make even a dent in an industry all but monopolized by Sony. Because of its not-so-secret weapon—The World's Deepest PocketsTM—it inhabits a rare position in an open market: to become a catalyst in the evolution of an art form.

A small item, perhaps, but it's refreshing to note that in press releases, Microsoft refers to its pool of developers as "artists"; a rare occurrence in the business of videogames. To the point: Microsoft can choose to succeed on quality and innovation, and we're starting to believe that it might do so.

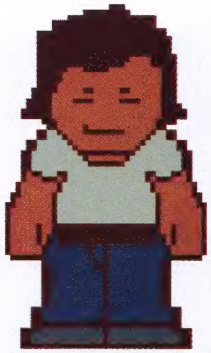
Either that or Xbox is the most monstrously conceived capitalist plot we have ever had to face.

Evan Shamoon

Team

Evan Shamoon
Kamikaze Editor

Using sophisticated management techniques, chief among them repeated blunt-force traumas and acid spritzings, young Evan Shamoon has taken the staff of *Xbox Nation* from a slovenly band of shoeless, moonshine-drinking yokels to a slovenly band of *shoed*, moonshine-drinking yokels. He is like the unhewn log, but only before lunch.



David Ziganay
Kool Moe Z

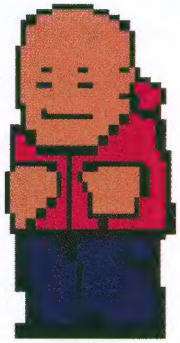
David Ziganay is tight like the Gordian Knot, more talented than the Talentron T-5,500 Talent Machine, as smart as one of those chickens that always beat us at Tic-Tac-Toe (if not more smart), and you kids had best be keeping off his lawn, if you know what's good for you. Ziganay knows it is best to keep weapons out of sight.

Greg Orlando
Subatomic Genius

Journeyman crash-test dummy Greg Orlando narrowly missed his calling as the fifth Horseman of the Apocalypse, Stubbed Toe. Now he gets paid to think up clever new ways to say "[Insert Game Name Here] is 10 pounds of unreclaimed yak feces in a 5-pound bag." He says, "Too much activity deranges the mind."

Che Chou
Eentertainment

The Magic 8-Ball heralds this future for editor Che Chou: a glorious marriage and a long life spent toiling as a slave breaking rocks on a desolate planet for mildy intelligent space monkeys. Please send toasters and cash to: Che Chou's Wedding Swag, Xbox Nation, 101 Second Street, San Francisco, CA, 94105. Like a good traveler, Chou leaves no tracks.



Andrew Mendoza
Uncle Drew

A steady diet of ennui and Harrison Ford movies has turned Drew Mendoza from an upstanding young man into the cinnamon-loving Lord of The Dance, said dance being sort of a cross between *Le Robot* and *The Macarena*. As Mendoza is "pleasant" and not "homicidal," we have elected him our new god. In losing, Mendoza has found much was gained.

Jeremy Sarmiento
Let his people go!

As *Xbox Nation*'s intern, young Jeremy Sarmiento has learned it is easier to carry an empty cup than one that is filled to the brim.

Contributors

Jason Brookes
Freelance Writer
With a stiff upper lip, plucky Brit Jason Brookes traveled to Japan and all he got was a lousy case of Yokozuna's revenge, as well as a T-shirt. You can read his interview with Similebit's *Panzer Dragoon Orta* in this very issue, or you can request Brookes come to your house and read it to you, you stupid lazy bastard.

Paul V. Byrnes
Freelance Writer
Fearing that people might think him too erudite and also high-falutin', Paul "V." Byrnes asked that we not print his middle initial. As you can see, the concerns of one man mean nothing to us, even if that one man has superhuman strength and speed, laser death eyes, and razor-sharp stabby claws. Which Byrnes does not.

Raina Lee
Freelance Writer
Raina Lee, in addition to her fine work for this here publication, also writes and edits her own videogame fanzine *1-Up*. You should buy this fanzine because we know people, and these people we know would be very displeased if you did not buy a copy. Send your $$$ to: Raina Lee, P.O. Box 361135, Los Angeles, CA, 90036. Or else.

Jeff Lundrigan
Freelance Writer
Hard-drinking curmudgeon Jeff Lundrigan's love for processed "cheez" is real, but he is not. Lundrigan, who freelances for all sorts of publications, would have gotten away with it if it wasn't for you damn meddling kids!

Cheryl Del Rosario
Art Intern
Cheryl Del Rosario was the one who let the dogs out. R.I.P. Jam Master Jay.

Carrie Shepherd
Editor-at-large
Because Carrie Shepherd is the nicest person on the planet, making even Mother Teresa herself seem like an unrepentant scumbag, we gave her two bad Xbox party games to review. Shepherd, we are proud to note, now walks up to random strangers, punches them, and blames it on *Nickelodeon Party Blast*.

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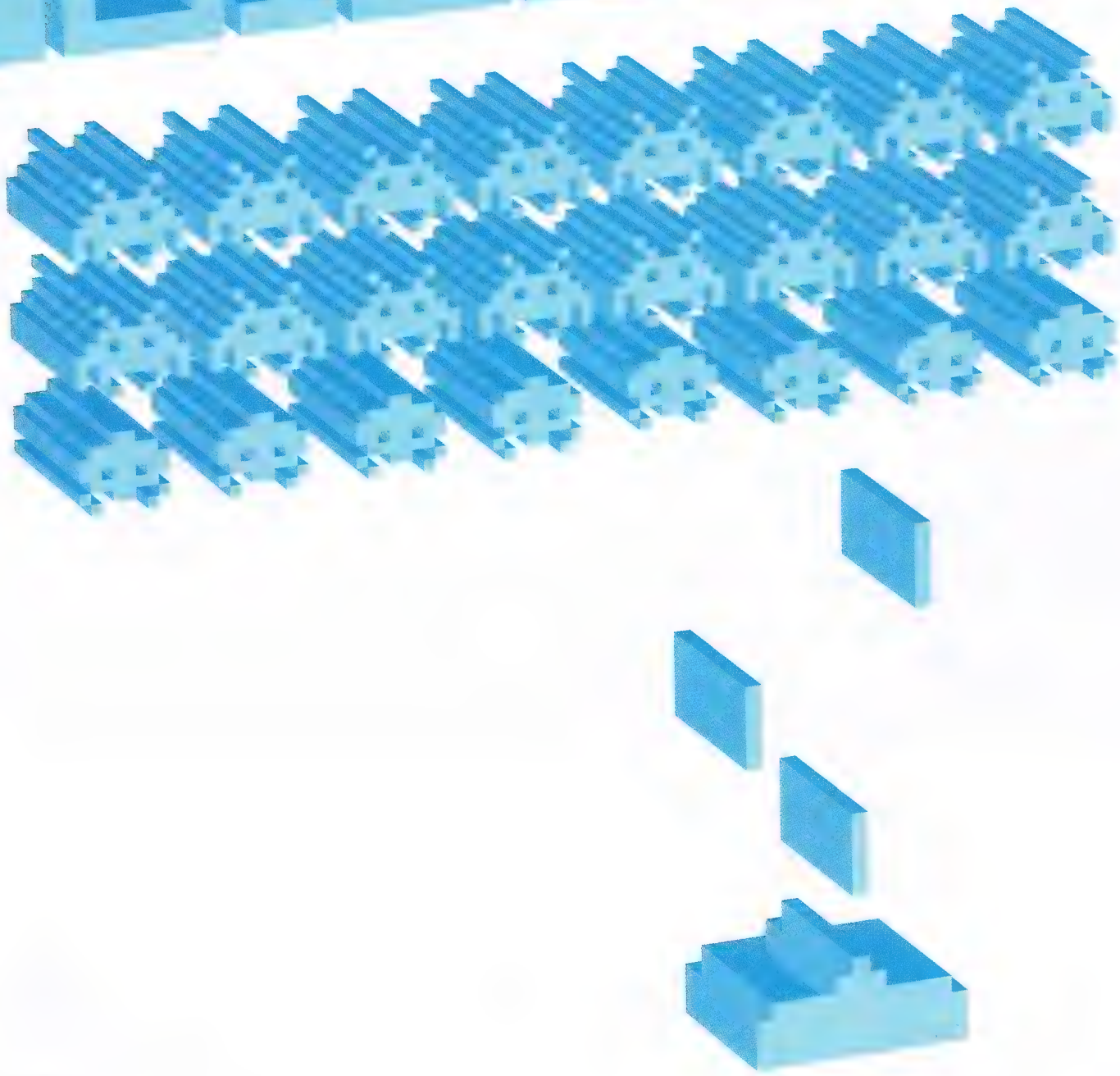
SURVIVAL OF THE BIGGEST



Xbox Nation tracks the players in the great console car race of 2003. Drop the checkered flag....

If game consoles were cars, then the three players in the market would be very different indeed. The PlayStation 2 would be a Toyota Camry: It's competent, reliable, the best seller in its class, and bought by everyone who doesn't have the imagination or desire to buy something more interesting. GameCube would be a Subaru Impreza: Made for enthusiasts, it's hardcore, small, fast, and something that appeals to niche tastes.

But what of Xbox? A Cadillac Escalade. Big, powerful, all-American luxury that's recently found its cutting-edge niche. Without a doubt, the Xbox is tech.

Developers love it, and we're finally beginning to see what the hardware can do. As we get into the middle of 2003, we'll really start to get a glimpse at what the machine is capable of, making apparent the tangible differences in the three systems' abilities. Just as an Impreza couldn't pull a 20-foot yacht while seating five comfortably (as an Escalade could), the GameCube simply isn't capable of bringing us a game such as *Fable* or *Halo 2*.

Xbox's fortunes fluctuated wildly over the holiday period, but on the whole it had a solid season. Xbox Live has been a roaring success, widely acknowledged as the best online console experience, and far exceeding expectations. The Live Starter Kit sold out in its first week, and there are now over 200,000 people using the service. It's an unprecedented success, and is further boosting confidence in the system for 2003.

The year ahead will be a dramatic one for gaming. As all of the current systems hit their stride, we'll see some huge changes that will have tremendous effects on the games we're playing. The current industry buzzword is consolidation.

As all entertainment industries have seen, as time progresses we see the number of key players diminish. As one industry insider told *Xbox Nation*, "Consolidation is nothing new to the gaming biz. But the cost of doing business, and in particular, the cost of failure now being so high, pretty much ensures that the rich will get richer, and the poor will get poorer. In many ways, the gaming biz is like the U.S. airline biz right now. The business model is fundamentally flawed, so you either have to be huge and benefit from economies of scale or be cunningly opportunistic. The cost of building games does not correlate with the reality of average sales volumes. First parties, EA, and the big Japanese publishers will drive the industry forward."

Another key executive told us, "Corporate Darwinism is a must, and right now we have way too many companies in this space making crap games. The likely suspects will survive; EA, Sony and Microsoft. Beyond that, no bets."

As we go to press, rumors are rife with tales of mergers and acquisition. Name two games companies and, chances are, there are rumors of one buying the other. Microsoft to buy Sega? Nintendo to buy Capcom? Microsoft to buy Blizzard? Sony to buy EA? Activision to buy Midway? No rumor is too grand as the future of gaming is plotted out and the big players dictate what system you'll need to play specific franchises. It seems that the days of all games on all systems are numbered, and Microsoft will play a key role in dictating which games remain exclusive to Xbox.

Will the games themselves change, though? Will the coming year see a shift in what we actually get to play? Although games like *Splinter Cell*, which have now sold close to 1.5 million units currently drive the market (and a lot of the big hits for the Xbox this year are similarly adult: *Brute Force, Halo 2, Fable,* etc.), game publishers are spreading their bets.

"The audience will get younger," one of our insiders tells us. "Our research shows us that with the three consoles on the market, they tend to be shared by families right now. When they become cheaper and more mass market, you'll see consoles migrating back into bedrooms and dens. They're just too expensive right now to be toys, and as gaming has become more gregarious and acceptable as a family pastime, the console will happily sit in the family room right now. That will change."

The great car race has begun, and all the racers are jockeying for position. We expect that the winner may not necessarily be the one to cross the finish line before the others....

Ultimate Gamers Unite

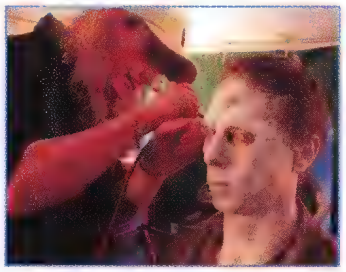
Staples Center to host geek party

The Ultimate Gamers Expo, a convention for videogame enthusiasts (as opposed to and jaded journalists), will take place at the Staples Convention Center in Los Angeles from August 15 through 17, 2003. "We realized that fans are not able to access traditional gaming expos and we wanted to respond with an event geared specifically for them," says Ultimate Gamers Expo founder Wayne Pepper. "We are allowing fans to sample all the latest technology and games in an arena where they can give feedback directly to developers and publishers."

The UGE will feature product demonstrations, design workshops, and gaming tournaments in which heads can compete in a variety of genres. The organizers further promise live entertainment such as music, extreme sports shows, and appearances by Corey Feldman and Anna Nicole Smith. No, but seriously, admission will cost $20 for adults and $10 for minors.

"We are creating the ultimate game player's fantasy," said co-founder Joe Hubbard. If you fantasize about convention halls and awkward glances with women who would otherwise never give you the time of day, head on over to: http://www.ugexpo.com/.

If you attend the Ultimate Gamers Expo, you can expect your geek quotient to rise proportionately.



DEAD ON ARRIVAL

Throwing eggs at *The House of the Dead*

Street Fighter, *Super Mario Bros*, *Resident Evil*, and most recently, *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*—all seminal games that were baited by Hollywood producers to take the great silver screen plunge. With *Tomb Raider* actually raking in a hefty box office receipt—mostly due to Ms. Angelina Jolie's sultry lips, huge breasts, and supreme star power—the game-to-movie adaptation conveyor belt has kicked into full speed and, in the case of *House of the Dead* (a low-budget epic based on Sega's lightgun-based zombie shooters), shifted into maximum overdrive.

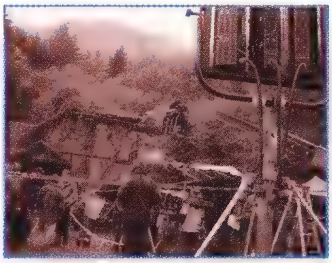
Walking around the Vancouver set of *House* last May, it was entirely obvious the movie falls into the same sub-par category as all the rest of the videogame dreck. While the set design was impressive (it featured graveyards teeming with impaled bodies, bloodied skulls, and an assortment of detached limbs), the film's premise is anything but.

"We took the backdrop of the game and used the mythology of the creatures, but we constructed an original story as well," says Mark Altman, executive producer and co-writer. "The movie is structured very much like a videogame, where we have our boss character—our Freddie Krueger or our Michael Myers—who is behind the zombie manifestation."

Adapting *House of the Dead III* into a horror flick is as simple as handing a bunch of youngsters an arsenal of firearms, throwing them onto a remote island near Seattle, and adding Clint Howard's (Ron's less-talented brother) brand of over-the-top gore for a campy, if not formulaic good time.

Judge for yourself: All the flesh-dripping, stomach-churning, B-movie hideousness can be seen in form of a making-of video on *The House of the Dead III* game disc. With its ridiculously low production values, the making-of featurette is guilty viewing pleasure, to be sure. *House* will open its doors to gamer masochists nationwide this summer.

Uncle Zebulon, fearful of the law of "On your feet, lose your seat," died in the comfort that only a nice, folding chair can provide.



The director became concerned with this location's lack of houses and briefly flirted with a new title, *Forest of the Indifferent*.

We've always wondered what vegetarians who die and become zombies eat.

Xbox Price Cuts

CNN speculated recently that a new wave of console price cuts is on its way. Though there's no concrete evidence, speculation has Microsoft, Nintendo, and Sony all slashing prices in time for May's E3 Expo. Expect the Xbox to sell for $149, the report says.

XPikmin?

Thousand Land, an eminently cute, *Pikmin*-esque title, features these red-and-yellow acorn critters frolicking and also getting eaten by a giant monster. From Software is making this one, which might come to the United States when Hitler's brain is elected president.

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Mild Lyrics
Mild Violence

PlayStation 2

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XBOX

AKA Acclaim

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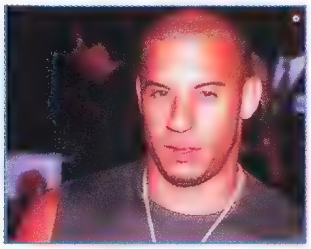
Games Imitating Life
GeForce FX a glimpse at Xbox 2?

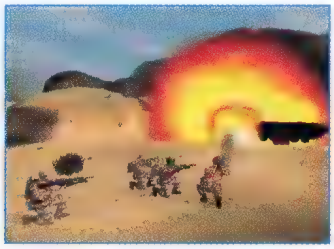
With the PC graphics market heating up between manufacturers ATI and Nvidia, the buzzword of the day is "shaders." Shaders define color and lighting on a surface based on external parameters. And what better way to show off shaders than to show a little skin in the process? This fairy demo on Nvidia's GeForce FX website (nvidia.com) uses a shader that accounts for moisture, light, and oily skin to give the texture photographic qualities. What you see here is next level stuff, and perhaps a glimpse of what we can expect on Xbox 2. Hot damn.

Diesel Powered Games
Vin Diesel starts up Tigon Games



Actor Vin Diesel, of *xXx* and *The Fast and the Furious* fame, has started his own game company called Tigon games (it's a cross between tiger and lioness...go figure), and its first game will be an action adventure in the vein of *Grand Theft Auto* titled *Perrone*. According to an interview with Gamespy.com, Diesel says the game is a "fascinating tale about how a guy got involved with the Mafia and police at the same time." No word yet as to which console(s) will play host the game, but one can hope the Xbox is conspicuously left out of any such conversations.

OP-ED: UNCIVIL WAR
Contributing writer Chris Turner deconstructs the of myth of sanitized violence



The most amazing thing about *Conflict: Desert Storm* is that such a relentlessly mediocre game could be so deeply offensive. *Conflict* is an strategic military sim from Take-Two Interactive (the publisher who brought *Grand Theft Auto 3* and *Max Payne* into your homes), and it is flaccid on nearly every level imaginable. The gameplay is unimaginative, the graphics would look out of date on a Nintendo 64, and the plot is clumsier than an episode of *Hogan's Heroes*.

But these aren't *Conflict*'s worst offenses. The game's true irresponsibility lies in the way it treats a real war, in a real setting, with all the care and nuance of a Van Damme flick. Every Iraqi in *Conflict* is a faceless drone who dies without so much as a struggle, sporting the same awkward death animations and a small ketchup stain on his shirt. The Stormtroopers in *Star Wars* are detailed character studies by comparison.

"No Diplomats. No Negotiation. No Surrender," brags the tagline on *Conflict*'s box, and it makes good on this promise. The Gulf War of 1991—its sequel, perhaps, coming soon to a 24-hour news network near you—is little more than a pseudo-realistic backdrop for a vaguely task-oriented killing spree. Stripped of its half-assed historical hook, *Conflict* is the very definition of senseless violence. An action game that's at best pretentious, and at worst horribly offensive.

Of course, *Conflict*'s not likely to appear on the radar of the usual defenders of impressionable children—organizations like the National Institute on Media and the Family (a moral watchdog affiliated with media-violence crusader Joseph Lieberman, that issues an annual "report card" on videogames). The games that cause mainstream-media uproars tend to be two things that *Conflict* is emphatically not: hyper-realistic in their depictions of gore, and fantasy-like in their settings. Thus, the gory chainsaw-wielding antics of action games like *Doom* and *Quake*, or the comic-book fatalities of *Mortal Kombat*—all set in nameless fantasy locales—trigger alarms, while equally detailed and abundant killing in realistic settings (found in games like Tom Clancy's real-world shooters *Ghost Recon* and *Splinter Cell*) make it past the would-be censors. This logic becomes even more tenuous when you consider that *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* makes Lieberman's "Parent Alert!" list (in part because its otherwise realistic World War II setting features "occult and paranormal" creatures), while *Medal of Honor* (with its blood-soaked recreation of the D-Day invasion) does not.

The message here is clear: Games that carry out massive amounts of violence and carnage in a fictitious setting will produce a generation of gangsters, snipers, and psychotics, while it's perfectly upstanding to kill in the name of righteousness.

It all begs the question: why is it socially acceptable to glorify war? Why, for example, did the "toxic culture of violence" in Hollywood (that Lieberman railed against so fervently) not include war films like *Pearl Harbor* or *Saving Private Ryan*? It's unlikely that impressionable youngsters will ever find the inner light to question whether they—or their nation—should join a crusade against an "axis of evil" that populates both reality and virtual reality. The Iraqis in the crosshairs of *Conflict* are on CNN every night; why *wouldn't* Junior be lured into thinking the world is inhabited by two-dimensional automatons donning white rags and turbans, targets whose lives are essentially worthless?

When the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) rates a game, its "content descriptors" (i.e. the bad influences) include Blood, Animated Blood, Blood and Gore, and Violence. (How do you separate blood and gore from violence, anyway?) Other tags warn about vices like drug use and gambling, as well as mature themes like swearing and nudity. But if the board's goal is to inform consumers about the true nature of the games, they might come up with new descriptions. The box copy on *Conflict* states, "All Americans pledge allegiance. A select few show it." How would the ESRB classify that? Perhaps they could slap on a label like War-Mongering, or how about Dehumanization? An ESRB rating warns of Suggestive Themes. Propaganda is, by definition, suggestive in nature. Would *Conflict: Desert Storm* qualify as propaganda?

Chris Turner

[The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of Xbox Nation, or its parent company Ziff-Davis Media.]

Help Wanted

Hah! We wouldn't hire you if your name was Bill Gates and your résumé was written on $1,000 bills. Still, if you want some great information on how to get a job in the gaming industry, check out http://www.codemasters.com/jobs/careers/. It's free!

Eplieptics: Avoid Games

The American Epileptic Society or, as we refer to it, The American Redundancy Society, has recommended that people who get seizures as a result of playing videogames prevent further seizures by not playing videogames. They also recommend eating when hungry.

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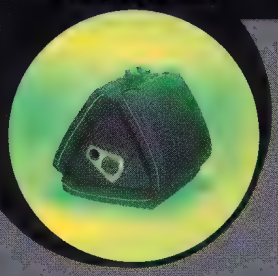
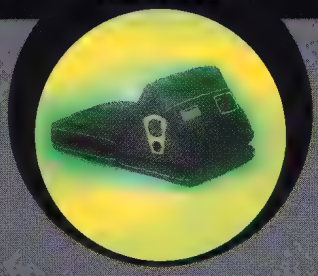
MULTI-USE DESIGN

Unique shape enables compact storage and portability



Quickly transforms from a chair to a lounger



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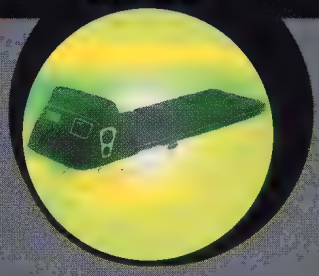

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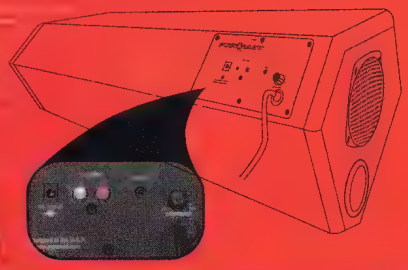

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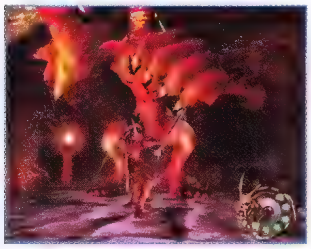
O.TO.GI.
O.YEAH.THIS.LOOKS.NICE.



Known largely for its *Armored Core* series on both PS One and PlayStation 2, From Software is one of the few Japanese developers currently maintaining a steady stream of Xbox development. Its newest entry, *O.TO.GI.*, looks to be the their most promising entry yet.

The game draws upon the depth of Japanese myth. Players take control of Raikou, a samurai pitted against demons from Japan's Golden Age. By incorporating authentic (and philosophically significant) architecture and religious artifacts, From has created a gameworld rich in both legacy and mood. Nearly everything in the game—including said religious edifices—can be shattered, smashed, and annihilated, while the controls with which to do so are simple and intuitive. Within *O.TO.GI.*'s RPG-like play mechanics, players must fight enemies and gain points to buy new magic/weapons/items. *O.TO.GI.* is already out in Japan, and will see release here in Spring 2003. *XBN*'s sources hint that a publishing deal stateside is close to completion. Look for continued coverage in our next issue.

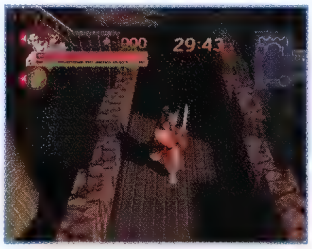
It's like *Centipede*, only it's not.

WE'RE ALL DOOMED
Doom III alpha build leaks; id Software displeased

One of Xbox's most coveted games of 2003 was "accidentally" revealed to gamers when a leaked, unoptimized, PC alpha version circulated like wildfire across the Internet. Information systems around the world were at a standstill last November when tens of thousands of curious fans scrambled to leech the game as quickly as Activision and id Software could pull them down. *Doom*'s creator John Carmack had this to say shortly after countless Web forums lit up with complaints about the game's piss-poor performance and rough edges: "No, this was not leaked on purpose. Yes, we are upset about it, and it will have some impact on how we deal with some companies in the future." Carmack stopped short of laying out any consequences for support plans in the future, but added that "making judgements from a snapshop [of *Doom III*] intended for a non-interactive demo is ill-advised."

Zombie blasting. Is there any more perfect form of entertainment? If there is, we don't want to hear of it.

NO MIS-STAKES ALLOWED
Three-dimensional fighter goes online



Xbox needs more online fighting games, and we're hoping *Stake* will slake our thirst for punching people via broadband.

Metro 3D's *Stake*, a third-person, 3D brawler in the vein of Capcom's *Power Stone*, will go online in 2003. The game's plot revolves around a mysterious combat event, not unlike every other fighting game's mysterious combat event.

Stake's fighters will have the requisite unique attacks, defenses, speeds, and so forth. Special "anger" power levels will fuel the brawlers' bloodlust, and characters will be able to smite each other righteously with such in-game objects as grenades, chunks of ice, hot oil, and rocks. Thoroughly *been there and done that*, *Stake* nonetheless looks beautiful, and will stake its claim at originality via a level editor allowing players to create their own stages.

The game will support up to eight players online, and Metro 3D promises to support *Stake* with downloadable content, including new fighters. Look for the game to see release before winter's end in 2003.

XBOX BURNS OUT
Acclaim brings *Burnout 2: Point of Impact* to Xbox

The war between the cars and the saftey cones was over before it ever even began.

Little known fact: The insurance premium on red cars is actually higher than that of cars that are not red. (Stripes don't help.)

You wouldn't think by looking at these screenshots that *Burnout 2* is anything more than just a generic racer set in no-name towns, featuring no-name cars. But it is. In fact, the PlayStation 2 version is one of our favorite arcade racers in recent memory, and now it's sliding onto the Xbox this summer. *Burnout 2* combines the power drifting of classics like *Ridge Racer*, with the urban density of *Crazy Taxi*. No real need to check yourself, when *Burnout 2* lets you absolutely wreck yourself.

Online Taunts (To Be Used On Xbox Live)

"Um, I'm sorry. The DNA test results are in. I am, in fact, your daddy." "Your weak play shames us both, and actor Tony Randall of Odd Couple fame, as well!" "How do you stink so much with only one butt?" "Welcome to Shamesville, Population: you."

Honduras Bans Violent Games

Third-world cesspool Honduras is seeking to ban the sale of violent videogames. The Central American pit of violence seeks to reduce its crime rate by preventing its citizenry from buying *Turok*. Consider us on board if Honduras bans all *Army Men* games forever.

THE REVOLUTION STARTS HERE

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XBOX

MATURE M CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood and Gore
Violence

VIS

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THE ONLINE ASSAULT BEGINS

Eight new maps, three new mechs, and two new game types to hit Xbox Live

Caught on film in a friendly game of "Catch My Laser," Madcat and Atlus lend credence to our sneaking suspicion that mechs are actually more interested in making friends with other mechs (and perhaps later sharing poetry) than blasting one another into scrap metal.

Starting this month and continuing through March, Microsoft and developer Day 1 Studios will be releasing a series of new multiplayer maps for their Xbox Live shooter *MechAssault* over the Net. Once downloaded (and saved to the Xbox hard drive), players can engage in heavy metal warfare both on and offline. Hell's Kitchen, the first of the downloadable content made available on January 1st, features a volcanic map populated by large electrical plants and pools of hazardous lava.

Subsequent bonuses material include the Raven, Loki, and Hellbringer mechs, as well as eight additional maps on which to do battle. Even cooler is the fact that you'll also be able to download two new multiplayer game types: Capture-the-flag (CTF) and Objective Raid. In the ever-popular CTF mode, opposing teams scramble to grab each other's flags and return them to home base for points. Microsoft hasn't revealed much about Objective Raid, but we imagine it'll play out just like it sounds: two teams attack or defend a set of objectives required to win the map. Both CTF and Objective Raid will also be available offline for splitscreen deathmatch.

Players who haven't downloaded the extra content will be able to see others who are hosting new maps, but won't be able to join without downloading a set of their own. Microsoft also plans to distribute these goodies through more traditional DVD methods, but it definitely won't hit store shelves until after the Xbox Live download period.

Now if we could only download some opponents who weren't total online shnooks when we beat them.

Robbie Williams

The ego has broadbanded

British popstar Robbie Williams has teamed up with Microsoft to promote the Xbox as part of his 15 show tour across Europe in 2003. Robbie "Fusion Frenzy" Williams was overheard saying: "I'm really glad Xbox is partnering us for our new tour. I love playing Xbox at home, and now I get to play it every night!" A special Williams DVD pack release in Germany will feature an exclusive Xbox DVD controller and, get this, "a special message from Robbie to Xbox gamers." We're absolutely electrified by this historical pop-gaming crossover.

LAND OF THE SETTING SUN

Listen closely and you can almost hear the crickets chirping....

News of the Xbox selling poorly in Japan comes as a surprise to no one, not even Microsoft. Surely, nobody thought the world's most formidable software publisher would step in like Admiral Perry and succeed in cracking the tough Japanese gaming market on their first try, but the degree to which the console is floundering is certainly unexpected. Trying to sell an Xbox in Akihabara is like peddling Christmas trees in June; a snapshot of a typically busy week last December showed that Microsoft only moved 6,071 Xboxes, compared to 78,970 PlayStation 2's. In fact, analysts are predicting that Sony will probably sell more systems just in the months of November and December alone than the total number of Xboxes Microsoft will sell in Japan—ever. To alleviate some of their stock, many retailers have unofficially lowered the Xbox's price to 19,800 yen ($160), a 5000 yen drop, in hopes of boosting sales.

It's not as if Microsoft hasn't tried to woo Japanese consumers. But even with recent events, such as a promotion for Japanese hopeful *Blinx: The Time Sweeper*, Microsoft drew a crowd that had less audience than event staff. (Even the Blinx-garbed kogals pictured here look bored and embarrassed.) What's worse, despite all the marketing, *Blinx* couldn't even chart in the weekly top 50 (with game #50 selling just over 5000 copies).

There is a glimmer of hope for the future, as Microsoft of Japan has recently stated that they're learning from their mistakes; word has it that they'll rectify with a smaller, much sleeker Xbox 2 (and one that will actually fit in modern Japanese homes this time). One can only hope this is the first of many steps Microsoft takes if they plan to court Japanese gamers.

Apparently, dressing up 25 ladies as *Blinx* did not work. *Blinx* sold fewer than 5,000 copies in its first week on sale in Japan.

Galleon Still Delayed

It wouldn't, strictly speaking, be a "year" without the long-delayed action adventure *Galleon* getting pushed back yet again. This Interplay adventure should see release when Hell freezes over, monkeys fly out of our butts, or soup eats us. Expect another delay next issue.

Microsoft Buys Everyone!

Here's a list of companies that haven't been rumored to be bought, or about to be bought, by Microsoft: Amalgamated Zeppelin, Western Groutworks, and United Spats and Congreaves. Find your own favorite buyout rumor at www.insertnameofvideogamewebsitehere.com

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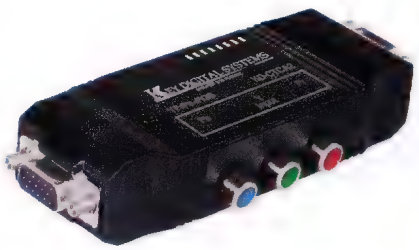
STUFF TO BUY

If you don't buy stuff and plenty of it, apparently, then the terrorists win. Check out the latest and greatest merchandise for your Xbox and your life.



Product: X-Blaster
Manufacturer: Key Digital
http://www.keydigital.com
Price: $250

High definition may be the name of the game with the Xbox, but not everyone has a few grand laying around to drop on a HDTV. What to do? If you have a high resolution SVGA monitor on hand, then all you need is Key Digital's X-Blaster. The X-Blaster is a video transcoder—it converts the Xbox component signal to SVGA. Unlike cheaper upscan converters, there is no quality loss with a transcoder. The X-Blaster also features a pass-through VGA port for your computer, so it is possible to share a monitor between a PC and the Xbox.

Product: 50FD9934 Gas Plasma
Manufacturer: Philips
http://flattv.philips.com
Price: $7500 (MSRP: $10000)

With a street price of $7,500, the Philips 50" gas plasma screen is expensive, but hooking your Xbox up to one of these screens is gaming nirvana. Gas plasma does not suffer from the latency issues surrounding LCD displays, so the picture is crystal clear all of the time. An intelligent zoom mode allows standard 4:3 images to fill the 16:9 screen with minimal distortion and full HDTV support allows games such as *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4* (720p) and *Dragon's Lair* (1080i) to really shine. The only downside is the monitor's susceptibility to burn in; we left a game on pause overnight and now have a permanent mark on the screen.

Product: VX2000
Manufacturer: Viewsonic
http://www.viewsonic.com
Price: $1599 (Panel), $399 (Tuner)

At 20" of viewable space, Viewsonic's VX2000 LCD display is mighty intriguing. It has a native resolution of 1600x1200, an optional TV tuner box and user-friendly controls. Sadly, looks can be deceiving as the VX2000 suffers from a number of problems, the worst of which is a horrid ghosting problem. Whenever there is fast action on the screen you will see movement trails—and lots of them. The tuner box claims to support a component signal, however getting an Xbox game to display was a task in and of itself. The monitor would only run a game if the tuner box was turned on after the Xbox was booted past the dash and only in 480i. Not cool.

Product: Logitech Cordless Controller
Manufacturer: Logitech
http://www.logitech.com
Price: $69.65

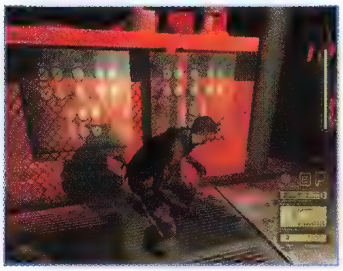
The cool, hand-friendly Logitech Cordless Controller seems to be just what the game doctor ordered. It's remarkably light considering it needs to hold four "AA" batteries and a small motor to make with the rumbling, and it eschews such intrusive features as raised rubber grips (see the MadCatz Lynx Wireless). With a minimalist design emphasizing substance over style, analog sticks featuring the perfect amount of resistance, and a range of 50 feet, the Logitech Cordless Controller gets the job done. And then some. Our only concern is that the device is not altogether Xbox Live friendly, as its receiver port is the only place to insert a memory card or dongle.

Product: Lynx Wireless Controller
Manufacturer: MadCatz
http://www.madcatz.com
Price: $59.99

Before the advent of MadCatz's Lynx Wireless Controller, we were wretched, cold, and miserable. Now, we are exactly the same, but can play Xbox games without pesky controller wires and from 40 feet away. The controller performed well in all respects, and the design of the Lynx is certainly pleasing to both eye and hand. The controller's a bit heavier than most, though, and the two analog sticks seem overly loose. We had the same concern with the Lynx that we had with the Logitech Wireless; simply, the Lynx is not the best tool when you want to go online with Xbox Live.

Product: Macross VF-1A Variable Fighter
Manufacturer: Yamato
http://www.yamato-toys.co.jp
Price: $149.99

Fans of Japanese anime *Macross* and *Robotech* can now indulge in $150 worth of the most detailed, articulate, and anime-accurate piece of plastic ever. This 1/48 scale, fully transformable mech clocks in at nearly 12 inches tall, and boasts novel features such as (excuse us as we speak geek here): a sliding heat shield over the canopy, rubber wheels on the landing gears, moveable airbrakes and flaps, retractable hands (with hinged fingers), and...does the goodness ever stop? The only thing missing from this decadent rendition is a lack of diecast parts, making this fighter feel more like a model than a toy. Here's a protip: do not attempt transformation when drunk.



SINGLE-CELL THEORY

Producer Mathieu Ferland talks about life after *Splinter Cell*

By now, you've no doubt seen the ubiquitous *Splinter Cell* TV ads featuring the sexy, gravelly voice of leading man Sam Fisher. Admit it: even if you haven't ever played the game (it received an 8 out of 10 from *Xbox Nation* last issue), the constant barrage of footage has stirred some sort of patriotic curiosity. *XBN* got the drop on Ubi Soft's Mathieu Ferland this month for a *Splinter Cell* post-mortem, to find out what's next for the hottest game to hit Xbox since *Halo*.

***XBN*: How do you think military games like *Ghost Recon* and *America's Army* (on the PC) are influencing younger gamers when it comes to America's war on terrorism?**

Mathieu Ferland: There are those who believe that realistic games such as the ones you mention are a positive outlet for some of the anxiety and tension in an atmosphere of instability. That may be true. At the same time, playing "army" style games has always been a popular diversion for kids, teens, and young adults; the heroism of the military inspires a certain awe and admiration. By creating a realistic storyline based on current events, we were able to come up with a very believable experience that is by sheer coincidence very timely. We developed the concepts for *Splinter Cell* long before the tragic events of 9/11 and the so-called "War on Terror."

***XBN:* What kind of content can we expect to download for *Splinter Cell* with Xbox Live?**

Ferland: The development team is working on downloadable content now. We know that it will most probably be available before the end of March, but the exact content and technical specs have not yet been finalized. We do hope to have a downloadable holiday surprise as an additional treat for fans.

***XBN*: What were some gameplay features or moves you guys wanted to include but had to scrap?**

Ferland: At one point, Sam was able to run and shoot at the same time, but we figured this gameplay wasn't stealthy enough and it was hard to aim. Since Sam is a professional, we couldn't see him running through a room and shooting wildly; that's just not his bag. Sam was also able to grab enemies' weapons. While it was a cool option, it made the game too easy. Sam had a lot more ammo and it unbalanced the game. It's also not a totally realistic. Sam would likely be too careful to trust in other people's weapons. We also had to drop some gadgets because the storyline changed. As property of Third Echelon, those gadgets are top secret, and cannot be disclosed. (I'm kidding, of course.) Those gadgets were really cool and we want to keep them under wraps as Sam may use them in the future.

***XBN*: What do you love and hate about *Metal Gear Solid 2: Substance*?**

Ferland: It's a great game. I was particularly impressed with the graphics.

***XBN*: Uh, okay, moving right along. What's up with Sam Fisher looking so much like George Clooney? You guys think Clooney's some sort of dreamboat?**

Ferland: We had the same feedback from a lot of people! Women especially seem drawn to Sam, especially women in the office. The resemblance to George Clooney wasn't intentional, but I guess now we know who to call if *Splinter Cell* becomes a movie.

***XBN*: There's a lot of trial and error involved in *Splinter Cell*. Why couldn't we skip cutscenes?**

Ferland: That's something we would fix if we could redo the game. Look on the bright side—it gives you a chance to grab a soda, or make a quick trip to the bathroom.

> We developed the concepts for *Splinter Cell* long before the so-called **"War on Terror."**

Sponsored by...

This issue of *Xbox Nation* has been brought to you by the witty rejoinder "talk to the hand!" the adjective "janky," and the idle threat, "If I wanted your opinion, I would beat it out of you." Also, we disavow any time spent in the bar with the Nazi hat.

Broccoli's Angels

Developer Broccoli is hard at work on *Galaxy Angels* for the Xbox, an adventure based on the anime of the same name. Frankly, we've never heard of the *Galaxy Angels*, but we expect lots of face-kicking babes and space battles.

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Play, boys.

The king of skin goes Xbox

In yet another piece of groan-inducing news, Playboy Enterprises has announced it will create, market, and distribute a set of "interactive simulation" videogames in conjunction with Groove Games. The first title, which will be playable on PC, PlayStation 2 and Xbox, is set for release in 2004. It is said to be a Sims-style game, allowing players to slip into the velour robe of Playboy founder Hugh Hefner, establishing and building the Playboy empire, and living the ultimate Playboy lifestyle. *Xbox Nation* plans to play the game, but solely "for the articles."

3D AGES EMPLOYS THE SHOVEL

Lackluster Dreamcast titles coming to Xbox

Sega's partnership with D3 publishing will bear fruit in 2003, but it seems the Xbox will only receive the dregs. Together, Sega and D3 formed the company 3D Ages (spell that backwards for maximum effect) to publish bargain-priced games for Sony's PlayStation 2 and other consoles, primarily in Japan.

In December of last year, 3D Ages announced its first wave of games for the Xbox, and four titles were mentioned: *Rent-a-Hero No. 1*, *Illbleed*, *Blue Stinger: Premium Cut*, and *Dynamite Cop 2*. This comes in stark contrast to the games announced for the PS2, which will see reworkings or all-new remakes for titles such as *Space Harrier*, *Phantasy Star*, *Golden Axe*, *Streets of Rage*, *Last Bronx*, *Phantasy Star II*, and *Virtua Racing*.

All four titles announced for Xbox first saw release on Sega's ill-fated Dreamcast. None was particularly brilliant, and this is perhaps being kind. *Rent-a-Hero* was a quirky adventure starring a would-be superhero; *Resident Evil* had nothing to fear from the B-rate horror adventure Blue Stinger; *Dynamite Cop* was an uninspired beat-em-up; and *Illbleed*'s high concept (and gore factor) couldn't mask its low entertainment value. It was not announced if 3D Ages would be visually reworking these titles, or creating all-new versions, nor is it certain that any of these games will make it to the United States.

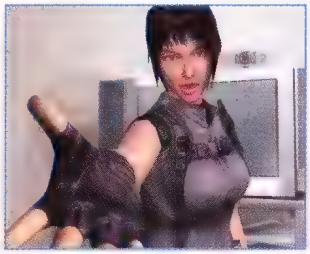
Regardless, the announcement comes as something of a snub for Xbox and its owners. Though one can hardly fault 3D Ages for concentrating its efforts on the PlayStation 2, it's difficult to imagine why the company would seek to dredge up and re-release mediocre titles just for Xbox.

This is what the Xbox gets. Hopefully, these titles will stay in Japan.

BREAK DOWN

Namco resurrects a forgotten genre: The first-person beat-em-up

"You win this round, Disembodied Arm Man!"



Top: Give this nice woman a hand. Bottom: Punching pasty-white guys is both fun and educational.

Bearing no discernable relation to the 1997 kidnapping-cum-heist movie starring Kurt Russell and an suitably evil J.T. Walsh, *Break Down* is Namco's newest entry into the ever-crowded action-adventure genre. Shown only in video form at the 2002 Tokyo Game Show (TGS), very little is currently known about the title, other than the fact that it's a first-person beat-em-up.

Shown only in video form, *Break Down* is known to follow the story of a two-person commando team. Weapons have only been shown in cinematics, and it's not clear whether or not they will be handled in-game. The Xbox-exclusive title is being developed by Namco Japan, which bodes well for both consumers (read: it's not *Dead to Rights*) and Microsoft, whose dismal Japanese development situation can use every boost it can get.

BlowOut, sans French and/or John Travolta

Publisher Majesco claims its Xbox-bound side-scrolling shooter *BlowOut* will take the nearly moribund genre to a "distinctively new level." The game features a commando shooting aliens, and will no doubt win all sorts of awards for its creative brilliance.

Extra Faction

Besides looking better than the PlayStation 2 version, the Xbox edition of *Red Faction* will contain extra multiplayer content. There will reportedly there will be 60 multiplayer maps and five new characters available; sadly, the game will not support Xbox Live.

THE ESRB VIDEO & COMPUTER GAME RATINGS

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EARLY CHILDHOOD

Titles rated "Early Childhood (EC)" have content that may be suitable for children ages three and older and do not contain any material that parents would find inappropriate.

EVERYONE

Titles rated "Everyone (E)" have content that may be suitable for persons ages six and older. These titles will appeal to people of many ages and tastes. They may contain minimal violence, some comic mischief (for example, slapstick comedy), or some crude language.

TEEN

Titles rated "Teen (T)" have content that may be suitable for persons ages 13 and older. Titles in this category may contain violent content, mild or strong language, and/or suggestive themes.

MATURE

Titles rated "Mature (M)" have content that may be suitable for persons ages 17 and older. These products may include more intense violence or language than products in the Teen category. In addition, these titles may also include mature sexual themes.

ADULTS ONLY

Titles rated "Adults Only (AO)" have content suitable only for adults. These products may include graphic depictions of sex and/or violence. Adults Only products are not inten-ded to be sold or rented to persons under the age of 18.

RATING PENDING

Product has been submitted to the ESRB and is awaiting final rating.

This message is brought to you by the Editors of:

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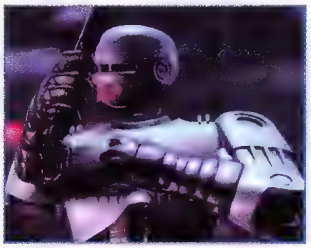
Robocop
Justice. Is. Serve. Ed.

Baby-food eating purveyor of leaded justice Robocop has a date with the Xbox. Titus, which can stake a claim to having published the single worst videogame ever made in *Superman* for the Nintendo 64, will be developing and publishing; the game is a first-person shooter wherein Robocop must shoot and/or arrest criminals while simultaneously protecting the innocent.

Though we're not talking about the deepest game here, Robocop will have some neat features: Violent gameplay (Titus may release the game with a Mature rating) and telescopic/thermal sights that players can activate by tapping the Xbox controller's D-pad. Robocop himself will be able to tote only one gun throughout the entirety of the game, but he will get to fight the fearsome robot ED-2000 sometime before the end credits roll. Color us peach and black. Color us taken aback.

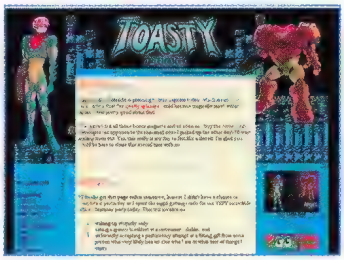


Fun Fact: Though the original *RoboCop* was clearly the best, *RoboCop II* featured a script by comic writer Frank Miller.

CONNECTED
Because clicking is good for your liver.

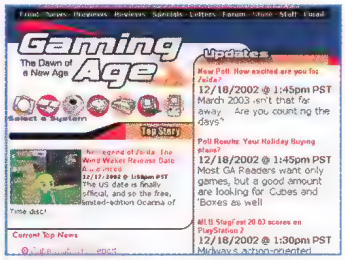
www.allmaple.com

From the land of the eating utensil now commonly known as "the fork" comes one of the most excellentest websites we've seen in ages. Allmaple is full of great content, ranging from interviews with cutting-edge industrial designers to online web art galleries, along with an assortment of music, book, and tech reviews; meanwhile, the flash interface and photography are some of the best we've seen on the web.



www.toastyfrog.com

If you read only one thing in your life, it should probably be toastyfrog's feature story on the most embarrassing game companies. Check out their commentary on Acclaim, a company so utterly clueless it once thought to promote one of its *Turok* games by paying couples a cash award if they named their newborn children Turok. The features on Capcom and 3D0 rule, too.



www.gaming-age.com

While Gaming Age has a decent selection of news, reviews, and previews on its site, it's the forums here that really matter. Everyone from editors and company execs to legions of dirty fanboys gather underneath this virtual gazebo to talk industry gossip and Japanese gaming news. We can't guarantee you'll survive completely unscathed, but what doesn't kill you only makes you stronger.

http://maddox.xmission.com

Okay, so clearly some people don't like Xbox, and we're cool with that, especially when the criticisms are hilarious. The feature "Seven Reasons Why The Xbox Can Suck It," is an absolute must-read. We won't spoil any of it for you, but it's all very well-done, if a bit graphic (In other words, it's probably not for kids.). Oh, and we recommend the rest of the site, too, as it's all written in the same delicious vein.

www.absorb.org

A virtual smorgasbord of information on cutting-edge music, Absorb is to sound waves what Sasquatch is to vitamin C. An endless supply of reviews, interviews, and all things underground electronic music, the site also includes excellent dj mix sets and in-depth features on the philosophy *behind* the drum machines. Simple, effective design and full of assorted bunly goodness. Right on, right on.

www.guerrillanews.com

Watching the *Guerrilla News Network* is like looking into the mirror and realizing you're a goddamn jerk who's insensitive to the needs of others. Except in this case, replace "you" with "The United States," and the self-loathing takes on global proportions. GNN takes real news media footage, cuts 'em up, spits 'em out, and syncs the whole thing to a variety of delicious beats.

Fireblade

Midway's *Fireblade* brings helicopter fights to the Xbox, and should be out sometime in the new year. There will be four separate environments to fight in, from the arctic to the Amazon, and players will have access to cool weapons like EMP pulses and homing missiles.

For Your Viewing Pleasure ...

Check out this very amusing and well-done Flash movie here: http://www.stileproject.com/flash/final.swf . We'd tell you what it's about (Final Fantasy), but that would sort of spoil the surprise. Oh, and the music is great, too.

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Thunderous Roar
Ray Bradbury meets Xbox

Because nothing makes a game sound better than text from a crisply written press release, *Xbox Nation* defers to Bam! Entertainment's PR shills: "The year is 2038 and time-travel has been invented, but people quickly find out that not all inventions are a good idea. A mysterious group known as the 'Global Entropy' is creating havoc in Chicago. Their plan is simple, return to the prehistoric past and completely destroy the present timeline. It seems to be working...Chicago is now a menagerie of horrifying hybrid creatures mutated dinosaurs, and vicious plant life. As the world's only hope, you must fight your way across the city to the time portal, go back in time and neutralize the cultists' plan to deflect the meteor that wiped out the dinosaurs. *A Sound of Thunder* Xbox is inspired by the Ray Bradbury classic story of time travel."

A Sound of Thunder the press release was somewhat more impressive than *A Sound of Thunder* the work-in-progress. A straightforward action-adventure, *Thunder* was a fine example of a solid idea not tuned to perfection; the time-travel aspects of the game were intriguing, but the mechanics seemed rather flat. We're hoping this one improves before its spring release.

A Sound of Thunder lets players tamper with time. Go ahead and shoot some dinosaur in the past and see what that does.

BURN YOUR MONEY!
U.K. activists sought to lower videogame costs with week-long protest

A grass-roots movement in the United Kingdom sought to strike the videogame industry where it hurt: in its pocketbook. The Fairplay Campaign (www.fairplay-campaign.co.uk) urged people to boycott buying videogames during the first week of December.

In its own words, Fairplay is "an organization set up by consumers and videogame industry professionals who realize that expensive games are killing the industry, condemning gamers to endless repetition of the same handful of boring, overpriced games, and costing the industry thousands of jobs."

There's no word yet whether or not the campaign had any tangible effect. Nonetheless, Fairplay promises to continue to promote awareness of the situation and, no doubt, arouse the ire of bloated game publishers across the United Kingdom.

Here's the poster for the FairPlay campaign. We wish the organization luck in its struggle to save us cash and heartache.

A NOVEL IDEA
For the semi-literate: Xbox-themed novels....

Xbox Nation staff members love all kinds of books: comic, coloring, cut-out, pop-up. We're all about the reading.

Fans of the written word will no doubt soil themselves at the notion of an extended literary session with *Crimson Skies* and *Brute Force: Betrayals*. These two books, published by the good folks at Del Rey and painted with pulpish prose, expand on the worlds created in the *Crimson Skies* and *Brute Force Universe,* respectively.

Authors Eric Nylund, Michael Lee, Nancy Berman, and Eric Trautman contribute stories for *Crimson Skies,* and popular author Dean Wesley Smith pens *Brute Force: Betrayals;* a quick scan of the books' text reveals such enlightening passages as "The banshee cry of the alert siren made Kahn's blood run cold," and one suspects both are targeted toward those who've just graduated from *Amazing Spider-Man* and are perhaps looking to expand their horizons.

Both titles sell for $6.99; for more information, check out www.delreydigital.com.

HIGH HEAT BASEBALL 2004
3D0 tosses a knuckleball onto Xbox

High Heat Baseball, otherwise known as the only good game 3D0 has made in the last 4 years, is back to dominate over the competition. *2004* features an entirely new graphics engine (they scrapped the last one because, well, it looked shite) and more realistic animations. For hardcore baseball fans, however, the selling point here has to be the game's tuning menu, which allows you to completely customize every nuance of the gameplay. *High Heat*'s release will coincide with spring training.

Here's a right-handed batter swinging for the fences. *High Heat Baseball 04* has it all!

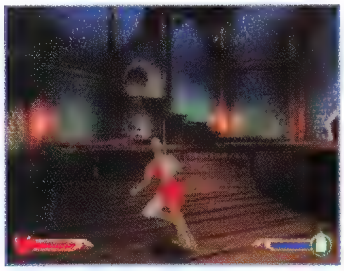
Here's a left-handed batter swinging for the fences. *High Heat Baseball 04* has it all!

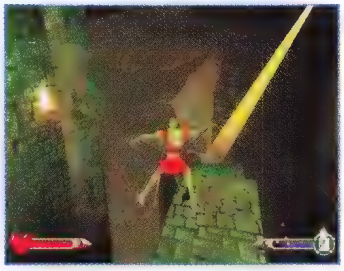
What we're playing:

Advance Wars, *Animal Crossing*, *Azurik: The Rise of Peratha* (just kidding), *Halo*, *Hitman 2*, *NBA Street Volume 2*, *Metroid Prime*, *Mutant Leage Football*, *Panzer Dragoon Orta*, *Steel Battalion*, *Super Dodge Ball*, and *ToeJam and Earl III: Mission to Earth.*

Overheard on Xbox Live

Overheard on Xbox Live *MechAssault*: "How about I just stand still and you run into the end of my gun?"; "These bullets are low in calories, so have some more!"; also, "Dude, that's gay," like six billion times.





THE LAST DON

Xbox Nation sits down with famed animator Don Bluth

Fans of animation revere Don Bluth as a sort of god. He began his animation career at the House of Mouse, working on such well-loved classics as *Robin Hood*, *The Rescuers*, and *Pete's Dragon*. When he left Disney to form an independent animation studio, the world of videogames would be forever changed. Bluth was the mind behind *Dragon's Lair*, a videogame that looked like a cartoon, ran off of a laserdisc, and ate quarters like Fred Flintstone consumed brontosaurus burgers.

The game starred a goofball knight named Dirk who battled a dragon named Singe in an attempt to rescue a hottie named Daphne. Though the gameplay was primitive, there was magic in the mold. Now, some 20-odd years after *Dragon's Lair*'s debut, Bluth is sitting in a small, cramped, and poorly lit room talking to *Xbox Nation*.

***XBN*: What stage is the movie at?**
Bluth: We're in pre-production on the movie right now. It's a prequel to *Dragon's Lair*, the game. We go back and figure out where Dirk came from, what kind of a guy he is, where Daphne came from. We had a lot of people look at the script, because it's all about the script; if a movie has a bad script, whatever you do with the animation doesn't matter. The script is getting a very good reaction.

***XBN*: Which studio? Not Fox, obviously.**
Bluth: Don Bluth studios, but we're looking for a distributor. So no, it's not Fox. We wouldn't go back to Fox. We were there for 7 years.

***XBN*: *Titan A.E.* was an amazing production, but it didn't do very well at the box office, and Fox was famously disappointed.**
Bluth: If you go back behind the scenes on that project, you find out that what goes on there is far more dramatic than what you see on screen. We inherited that project. They gave it to another director, and he mussed around with it until he'd spent 30 million dollars, and then Bill Mechanic [president of 20th Century Fox] said,"Well, we don't have anything else to give you out there in Arizona, so if you want to take this picture, you'd have 30 million against ya already." So, we started over with it. And there was another dynamic going on there with Bill Mechanic, who was the president of Fox. On *Anastasia*, they had spent the right amount of money to get it marketed and distributed, and we thought he would do the same with *Titan A.E.*. But Bill, I think, had gotten himself into a jam with a higher power than himself—Rupert Murdoch. And they fell out of love, and Murdoch wanted to get rid of Bill and he used the animation studio as the means to do that. They pumped into the selling of the picture about 15 million dollars less than they had planned, so that it never really got opened. And if it never got opened properly, how was it ever going to have legs? So that was the problem with it. At the end of the day all anyone ever knows is that a film went out there and didn't make money.

XBN: You left Disney in the '70s over creative differences, and you're not in a hurry to do crappy sequels for money. Is integrity a liability in Hollywood?
DB: Let me be philosophical here for a second: I think that art is a very special thing. What it does is it gets people to aspire, it gets them to look up. There's something about the artists in the world who sing and dance and write, and all of those performing arts. And animation I consider to be a performing art—if you're going to spend the hours and days of your life doing something, and you're going to be in the arts then you can lift people, and I'm just pompous enough to think that you can do that *[Laughs]*.You could just follow the money, and it would be easy enough to do that, but I always picture myself somewhere on my deathbed saying, 'Well, what did I do?" And I kind of like the idea that you can reach people. In a videogame you can do that too—you can lift people's spirits and lighten the load. You have to be careful; if you're taking them to a dark place with lots of violence, then why do it?

> You have to be careful: if you're taking them to **a dark place with lots of violence**, then why do it?

Taunted house

Online taunts for Xbox Live: "Um, I'm sorry. The DNA test results are in. I am, in fact, your daddy." "Your weak play shames us both, and actor Tony Randall of Odd Couple fame, as well!" "Welcome to Shamesville, Population: you."

The Last Piece of the Puzzle

This last newsblurb, all 40 words of it, was written at 6:41 am on Dec. 19, 2002. It was written by a desperate man whose brain held not one coherent thought. It was, in fact, the very last thing that was written for Xbox Nation # 6. And now it is done.

PHANTASY STAR ONLINE

Sega's much-loved *Phantasy* soon to be a reality on Xbox

Phantasy Star Online lets players create a unique hero from one of three classes: Rangers (who primarily use long-range weapons), Hunters (warriors), and Force (sorcerors). In addition, players can choose their character's race, height, and color scheme.

Although both companies have been surprisingly quiet on the matter, reliable sources have told *Xbox Nation* that *Phantasy Star Online*, Sega's majestic online multiplayer RPG, will be published by Microsoft in March.

The game, developed by Yuji Naka's Sonic Team, was first released for the Sega Dreamcast in mid-2000; although fairly straightforward in terms of both gameplay and mechanics, *Online* was the world's first online console RPG and, significantly, an ambitious attempt as well as an extremely polished overall experience. Beautiful graphics, nearly infinite items to find (and subsequently) relish, and real-time text chat between party members has made the game a landmark title in console gaming.

Sega has not announced whether or not the Xbox version of *Online* will sport any graphical or gameplay add-ons, or if the game will contain both *Phantasy Star Online ver. I* and *II* (as the GameCube edition had).

The most single known and, ultimately, most significant feature of the Xbox iteration is its real-time voice chat. And while it might appear to be a better option than furiously typing between swipes at an enormous, fire-breathing dragon (as was oftentimes necessary in both the Dreamcast and Gamecube versions), the possibility remains that it will defy some of the anonymous appeal of online play. Voice-masking seems a likely inclusion, but as anyone who has played *MechAssault* and felt the singular pain that is "TehGamezLORD29" telling you for the 157th to "eat my missiles s#!t-eater!" in the voice of "Dark Master"... well, you understand our concern.

More news on *Phantasy Star Online* as we hear it.

State of Emergency

PlayStation's loss is Xbox's gain?

Disappointing beat-em-up *State of Emergency* is Xbox-bound. The game, which failed to capture the imagination of PlayStation 2 fans last year, will be reworked slightly for the Xbox. Expect 14 new missions, new multiplayer options (supporting up to four players via split-screen), the ability to rip CDs and create a unique soundtrack, and a smooth 60fps for single-player mode. Rockstar will be publishing the title, Vis will be developing it, and *Xbox Nation* will be reviewing it for its next issue. We're hoping this *State* will be one of euphoria.

GAIDEN OF EDEN

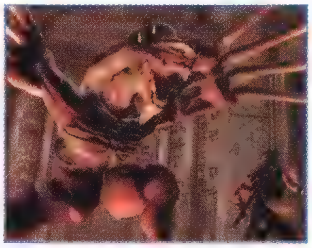
Tecmo shows off its shuriken-throwing classic, *Ninja Gaiden....*

Ninja Ryu Hayabusa stands atop of a tower, a small red laser-sight resting on his cheek. When the gun is fired, Hayabusa simply dodges out of harm's way.

The game was shown briefly at the Electronic Entertainment Expo last May, and again at Tokyo Game Show in September. *Gaiden* will be an Xbox exclusive, and should see release sometime near the end of the year. Tecmo has yet to reveal specific story or gameplay details for *Gaiden*, but *Xbox Nation* got its hands on the movie Tecmo showed at TGS and has watched it extensively.

All signs point to quality. The film shows a series of shock troopers with helmets and bayoneted guns, similar to the ones seen in the anime *Jin-Roh*, kicking up puffs of dirt as they run past a series of railroad tracks. After a quick cut, hero Hayabusa faces off against brown-clad ninjas; he leaps into the air, deftly slicing them with his sword, with animation and character models already looking well above Team Ninja's high standards. Hayabusa then faces off against another ninja, this one hanging from a ceiling, as they both toss shurikens at one another. The excellent pacing, slick moves, and solid design choices apparent in the demo certainly bode well for the final product.

The two-minute movie shows Hayabusa cutting an enemy in half and entering the sewers to do battle with fanged, leech-like creatures and a huge worm with a cavernous maw. These all-too-brief scenes feature extensive lighting effects as well as beautiful, rippling sewer water, and culminate with Hayabusa facing off against an enormous, taloned boss monster. Originally scheduled for an early 2003 release, the game has been pushed back so that Team Ninja can finish working on its naked volleyball sim.



Hero Ryu Hayabusa starred in multiple *Ninja Gaiden* games, as well as Tecmo's *Dead or Alive* series.

Ho, ho, hole in one....

It was a happy holiday season, especially for those who picked up a copy of Simon & Shuster's *Outlaw Golf: 9 Holes of X-Mas*. The game contained a Christmas-themed version of *Outlaw Golf* with nine holes and two all-new twisted golfers. It sold for a meager $5.

V For V-Rally

Infogrames recently announced the rally racing game *V-Rally 3* will be coming to Xbox. Developer Eden Studios promises the standard upgrades from the PlayStation 2 version in terms of graphics and gameplay. *Rally* is slated for an April release.

IT'S A LIVING...OR IS IT?

Oh dear Lord, I was a teenage game tester....

So you'd like to be a game tester, eh? Actually getting a paycheck for spending 40 hours a week playing the newest pre-release betas has got you breathless with anticipation? Well, dear friends, just sit right back and you'll hear a tale of another fateful trip, made by a few who were once like you.

It was as easy as answering an ad in the paper. It was the early months of 1996, and Acclaim Entertainment was hiring testers for its offices in Glen Cove, NY. It would be a mere 30-minute drive to work each day for a job that seemed to fall from the heavens and into the laps of many a Long Island gamer. The ad was answered, and an interview set up. All went well; an extensive gaming background was, technically, not required for the job, but it definitely helped.

There were many others hired at this time, as Acclaim (riding on the coattails of its major success with the *Mortal Kombat* conversions for home systems) was in the middle of an expansion period. The 20 or so new hires spent their first work week sitting around a long table listening to the pontification of a manager who we will refer to as "Tweedle-Dum." This guy hailed from the South, and looked like Gary Oldman with a mullet; according to legend (read: his own mouth), he had worked for other major game developers, was a kung-fu expert, had served in the U.S. Marine Corps, could defeat anyone at any sport, and was a fully credentialed Jedi Knight.

Our time at the round table lasted approximately six days. During this time, Dum managed to get himself (and his two siblings who came with him) fired for donning a headband and T-shirt (which was two sizes too small, and left his enormous belly exposed), and for pulling two employees out of the building to go and shoot some hoops. The rest of us went on to test a version of *Wrestlemania: The Arcade Game,* just to have "something to do." It was not a pleasant start.

It would seem the QA department had a very fraternal setup. Over the course of the year, I would find myself paired with several unique personalities. There was Renny, a guy who wouldn't stop dancing while we worked and routinely insisted that Billie Jean was not his lover; Phil, who smelled like lutefish and made beer in his basement; and Jill, the married lady who had asked me to help her beat a game at her home, only to end up showing me how her definition of cheat codes differed from everyone else's.

It was here that I first met my esteemed colleague and editor extraordinaire, who I will refer to as "Greg Orlando." Within the first week of employment, all of the new crew was given nicknames. I became known as Mozart from that day forward (anyone within earshot of my obscene cackle knows why), and Greg became "Milhous" (for obvious reasons). On more than one occasion, he and I were paired together for testing purposes, one of which resulted in the still unsolved Pretzel Incident. The QA department was located in a building about 100-feet away from Acclaim's main office, and three floors up. Nobody's really sure as to the details of this incident, but let's say that whilst Greg and several others were testing *Striker '96*, an errant pretzel rod went flying out of the third floor window and struck the rather hard head of another tester on the sidewalk outside. Since Orlando was known to have a disagreement or two with this individual, he became Acclaim's Lee Harvey Oswald for many months. I was more interested in the remarkable accuracy of the shot.

Just as this group of testers had begun their careers, things started going horribly wrong. Every title the company was turning out was garbage. Many months were spent testing such absolute gems as *Rise of the Robots 2* and *Iron Man/X-O Manowar in Heavy Metal* for Game Boy. You could have called it *Fat Hairy Guys in Heavy Syrup* and it probably would have been just as good a game as this disaster was. The most pleasant and thrilling gaming experience occurred after the original *Resident Evil's* release for PlayStation. The testers could talk of little else, especially whatever prize they were assigned to work on.

One miserable title after another led to low morale and rumors of imminent demise became rampant. Eventually, the rumors proved true, leading to massive layoffs. My greatest loss were the photographs I spent two days creating in the motion- capture studio down the street (which is now gone). In the pictures I was dodging imaginary creatures around a stand-up arcade machine, for an ill-fated *Ninjack* comic.

That is not to say that all companies operate the same way, and even Acclaim has managed to survive that time, but what one needs to take into account is that all positions in all companies involve working with other humans who are just as nuts as you are. In my case, I ended up working for a company that put licensing above quality, and in the process made everyone suffer for it...including themselves.

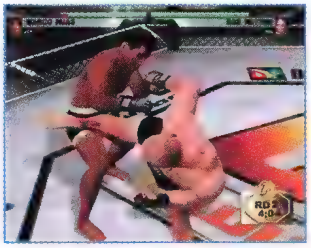
So when you sit down to fill out that application, remember to be careful what you wish for...you might just get it—and get paid a paltry $8 per hour for doing it.

Russ Garbutt

All positions in all companies involve working with other **humans who are just as nuts as you are.**

Bloody Good Sport

Violent *Tapout 2* on its way



For fans of the brutal arts and muscled grapplers struggling for domination, Crave plans to release *UFC Tapout 2*. The 3D fighting game, based on the (almost) no-holds barred combat as done by Ultimate Fighting Championship, has been announced as an Xbox exclusive.

The feature list for *Tapout 2* is impressive: 35 brawlers, each with his/her own style and moves; improved A.I. allowing for more combo moves, counters, and reversals; better graphics; smoother animations; and the ability to rip CDs and create a personalized soundtrack. Popular fighters such as Tito Ortiz, Chuck Liddell, Murilo Bustamante, Robbie Lawler, and B.J. Penn appear with improved character models, rippling muscles, and a new animation system allows them to perform 65 elaborate fighting motions.

A brief playtest of the game revealed that *Tapout 2* will likely outdo the mediocre *Tapout* both in terms of graphics and gameplay. An augmented career mode holds enough options to support 150,000 possible character variations, and fans of bloody cage sports and scantily-clad men hurting one another can expect to see this one sometime before spring.

Sweaty men in the Octagon kicking each other in the face—it simply doesn't get any more brutal than that.

Necroscope News

Author Brian Lumley's *Necroscope* novels are getting the videogame treatment. Players will control a vampire-hunting detective who can possess other people; little else is known about the game, but it should be on store shelves by year's end.

Raiden Fighters

Raiden is making a return. Developer New World System (with a staff of only 14 people) is ressurecting the top-scrolling classic in its original 2D format, with all of the pixel-y glory one might expect. We're hoping the Xbox becomes a home for more such endeavors.

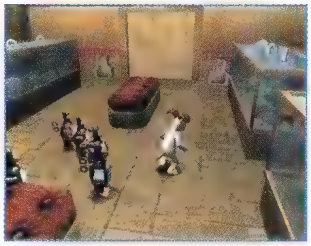
Claymation Nation
Wallace and Gromit get game

Keep a sharp eye out for *Wallace & Gromit*, a cute platforming adventure based on short British claymation films of the same name. Bam! Entertainment showed the game off at a recent San Francisco press event, and it's looking excellent.

Players take the role of the dog Gromit as he quests to liberate a zoo held by the diamond-loving penguin Feathers. Gromit will be accompanied by his human pal Wallace, who offers helpful hints throughout. Expect five huge levels (with 24 sublevels), wacky weapons such as the Porridge Gun, Coal Flinger, Banana Launcher, and Knitting Machine; plenty of special moves that allow Gromit to sneak past foes and perform backflips; and lots of tongue-in-cheek British humor.

We controlled Gromit as he scaled a series of wooden platforms in an attempt to rescue a baby elephant from captivity. Later, Gromit gained access to the banana gun, and was made to sneak past a monkey in order to gain access to a new area. It was all standard platform-game fare, certainly, but executed here with rare grace and beauty.

Developer Frontier has the game slated for an October release. Expect a detailed hands-on preview from *Xbox Nation* well before then.



Gromit the dog is always being pestered by clockwork penguins. Isn't that always the way?

MEGATON ANNOUNCEMENT
Microsoft plans to toss more money into Xbox

Despite a holiday-sales upturn and booming Xbox Live subscriptions, Microsoft still loses money with every Xbox it sells. With a reported $177 million loss last quarter and the market gap with Sony's PlayStation 2 widening, cynics have been speculated that Microsoft may pull out of the established games market like they have with other ventures such as WebTV and Ultimate TV.

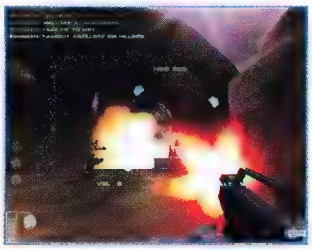
In a response to industry naysayers, Microsoft announced plans last November to throw even more cash into the wind as the Xbox steps up to year two. During a recent webcast, John Connors, Microsoft's chief financial officer, stated the company had no intention of bailing on the Xbox platform and that "the fallback position is probably to double down and make it successful."

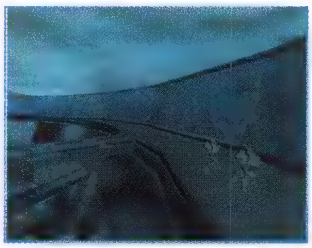
Analysts believe Microsoft will spend over $5 billion on Xbox by the end of its life cycle. Hoping that its continued efforts will finally bring Xbox into the black, Microsoft is currently working on designs for Xbox 2, which is rumored to be an internal project featuring original CPU and graphic chipsets. Such a scenario would save Microsoft exorbitant licensing royalties from companies like Intel and Nvidia.

Microsoft has shown an aggressive streak in the past months, purchasing British videogame developer Rare and its properties for $375 million in cash. With the purchase, Microsoft made a bold statement to Sony, Nintendo, and game fans across the world. Microsoft is in the console business for the long haul, which means Xbox, no matter what the naysayers think, will not go gently into the night.

Top: We're not exactly sure. Bottom: John Connors, Microsoft's chief financial officer.

BREEDING A BETTER GAME
Independent mentality and epic scope push *Breed* onto *Xbox Nation*'s radar





Above, below: Here are two rather unremarkably screen shots, inspiring a rather unremarkable caption.

We're thinking Master Chief and *Halo* right about now. Does anyone else agree? Where's the plasma rifle?

The work of tiny U.K.-developer Brat Designs, *Breed* appears to pick up where *Halo* and *Battle Engine Aquilla* left off. Using a proprietary game engine dubbed Mercury, *Breed* centers on interstellar conflict while attempting to mesh various genres into one. "Probably the most important innovation in Breed is the sheer scale of the environments," Brat Programmer Adam Perfect told computerandvideogames.com. "You can fly down to Earth from the Darwin [your ship], with a seamless transition through the atmosphere, land, get out, and go through what would be a whole mission on land in another game before getting back in the dropship at the end and flying home." Screens look spectacular already, and the team's indie mentality—that is, using limited resources, a proprietary game engine, and a small, focused development team—has us hungry for more. Expect a full preview and an interview with Brat Designs next issue.

WrestleCrap!

After reviewing the flawed wrestling title *Legends of Wrestling II*, we were compelled to visit www.wrestlecrap.com. Site owner R.D. Reynolds does an excellent job of poking fun at wrestling and its stupid gimmicks, such as the Shockmaster and Isaac Yankem D.D.S.

The game we can't tell you about ...

Under orders not to talk, *Xbox Nation* certainly did not see, nor does it know anything about a certain videogame starring a certain comic book character whose name sounds remarkably similar to "The Inedible Bulk." So we won't say a single word about it.

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From the Editors of:

TOKYO TRIBE

Or: How to win Japanese hearts, minds, and wallets...

Foreigners in Japan can be categorized into two distinct groups.

Group A respects the local culture. They're sensitive to Japan's social peculiarities. They dress well. They act civilized. They bring an attitude and a liberated cool that many Japanese people aspire to. These people do well in Japan.

Group B comes to Japan thinking that by being foreign, they're *automatically* cool and superior. In reality, they're seen as big, oafish, sock-and-sandal wearing embarrassments no one wants to be associated with. They start to develop the paranoia that people in Japan hate them. "There's nothing wrong with me...everyone's just racist." They don't do well in Japan.

This analogy can be applied quite closely to the success and failure of foreign companies in Japan.

Some examples: Starbucks is part of group A. It crept almost spookily into Japanese urban culture. Its management is almost entirely Japanese, and the operation is strategically tied to a large Japanese conglomerate which has showed its American parent the way here. Result? The world's most popular Starbucks is in Shibuya, Tokyo. A Starbucks is on every corner in Tokyo and, surprisingly, brimming with young trendies drinking its overpriced goop. Starbucks has succeeded in Japan.

Other examples of foreign firms in group A include Disney, which has made Japan its second-largest market, and designer brands like Gucci, Vuiton's, and just about anything Hollywood.

Microsoft and its Xbox are prominent members of group B. Xbox is big, ungainly, ridiculed. It even sort of smells different. It probably also carries herpes, doesn't wash often, and steals pocket change from grannies. In short, Japanese people are suspicious of it. But why?

Presumably, the Xbox guys conducted extensive research on this one with focus groups, management consultants, strategists, and so on. They could blame dozens of things, but one will find most of them stem from two major issues: adaptation and no gaijin, or foreigner, allure.

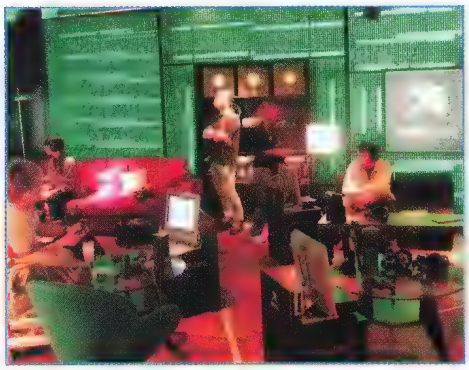
First, Xbox has simply failed to adapt to the peculiarities of Japan. What's more, Xbox Japan employees tend to complain that they can't do anything, that Redmond makes the big decisions.

This accomplishes three things. First, it kills accountability. The guys from Microsoft Japan will eventually move onto Konami, Namco, wherever, and they won't really care, because the fate of their business wasn't in their hands. They don't feel responsible. They have someone to blame if it all goes under.

Second, it means that self-defeating decisions are repeated again and again. Culturally insensitive decisions. Decisions that group B people make. A joke of a retail presence. Yucky green packaging that revolts Japanese design sensibilities. Games with about as much cultural appeal as a dating sim in America. Socks with sandals.

Finally, it further develops the perception that Xbox Japan is a non-Japanese entity. If you lose that, you lose other things like approachability, loyalty, and trust.

But Microsoft's biggest problem is its lack of gaijin allure. Xbox, as a brand, has squarely failed to capture the allure of successful foreign products. It has failed to position itself as an aspirational product, in the way that other the successful foreign brands



have in the country.

Now, one might ask, can Xbox really position itself as an aspirational product? Yes, it can. As a piece of hardware, Xbox is a superior product. It's high-end, hi-tech, and a significant leap forward from the PlayStation. But it's not being marketed as such.

Japanese women flock to international supermarkets to pay 30 percent more for a foreign-branded food, because they believe by buying foreign tea or jam, they're buying better—a product that's more stylish and more sophicated. There isn't a Japanese clothing brand in the nation today competing with the allure of Prada, Hemes, Vuiton, or Gucci. These foreign firms have successfully positioned themselves as higher quality, better looking, cooler, —however you define it—superior.

Whether it's intentional or accidental, current Xbox marketing in Japan positions the machine as an alternative to PlayStation 2, which is a terrible mistake. The PlayStation 2 can't be beaten at its own game in Japan.

So the question is, how can Microsoft win friends and influence people? For starters, it can change the customer. Get him to move on and upgrade by using a different approach: endless brand ads in *Famitsu* magazine, trains full of *Blinx* posters, and billboards in Akihabara are a waste of space, money, and time.

Xbox must not go where PlayStation 2 is positioned; it simply makes Microsoft's brand look stupid. Microsoft must stop going after the same exclusives as PlayStation 2. Ports of *Onimusha* and *Metal Gear Solid*? Who green-lighted these titles?

At the Tokyo Game Show 2001, Japan Xbox head Miyata-san commented, "Xbox continues the spirit of PlayStation." Oddly, we thought that PlayStation 2 continued the spirit of PlayStation.

Microsoft must find a new market or change the old game. That's how Sony beat Nintendo. It didn't try to ape Nintendo. Sony changed everything: the business, consumer expectations, and suddenly Nintendo woke up and found it had become a dinosaur.

Microsoft must make Xbox alluring, sexy, 100 times more exciting and cool than it is now. It has to find places Sony hasn't thoughtof; nothing is too big or small.

The super-stylish Xbox café, in Tokyo's most expensive boutique/office building is a definite step in the right direction. Opposite the café are the Asian headquarters of Merrill Lynch, UBS Warburg, and Prada.

The café is flanked by Harry Winston and a Conran Shop. A line of smart youngsters who frequent the surrounding shops wait by the entrance for seats. Others line the outside, peering in at Xbox demos playing on plasma screens within a dark, stylish interior. This might not seem like a big deal, but it's the only time in six months anyone aside from the hardest of hardcore Japanese gamers has taken an interest in Xbox.

The café is a hit. The execution is stylish. The message it gives is clear. And even Sony hasn't thought of it. It's a great start.

Justin Keeling

Vazhar
by Full Sail Grad
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XPRESS
Now and Next

LISTBOT

Here's what's coming.

Title	Publisher	Genre	Date
Jane's Attack Squadron	Xicat Interactive	Strategy	Feb
Robocop	Titus Software	Action Adventure	Feb
Top Gun	Titus Software	Flight Simulation	Feb
Top Angler 2	Xicat Interactive	Sports	Feb
The Lost	Crave Entertainment	Fighting	Feb
Colin McRae Rally 3	Infogrames	Sports	Feb
High Heat Baseball 04	The 3DO Company	Sports	Feb
Kung Fu Chaos	Microsoft	Fighting	Feb
Mech Hunter Murakumo	Ubi Soft	Action Adventure	Feb
Apex	Infogrames	Sports	Feb

Title	Publisher	Genre	Date
Shayde	Metro 3D Inc.	Action Adventure	Mar
Ninja Gaiden	Tecmo Inc.	Action Adventure	Mar
Chessmaster	Ubi Soft	Strategy	Mar
Sea Dogs 2	Bethesda	RPG	Mar
Gladius	Lucas Arts	Fighting	Mar
Freedom: Battle for Liberty Island	Electronic Arts	Action Adventure	Mar
Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Raven Shield	Ubi Soft	Action Adventure	Mar
Shaun Murray Pro Wakeboarder	Activision	Sports	Mar
FILA World Tour Tennis	Xicat Interactive	Sports	Mar
Sniper	Xicat Interactive	Shooter	Mar
Operation Flashpoint	Infogrames	Action Adventure	Mar
Rayman 3	Ubi Soft	Platform	Mar
Tao Feng: Fist of the Lotus	Microsoft	Action Adventure	Mar
NBA Street v.2	Electronic Arts	Sports	Mar
WWE RAW 2	THQ	Sports	Mar
Mace Griffin Bounty Hunter	Universal Interactive Studios	Fighting	Mar
Micro Machines	Infogrames	Shooter	Mar
Jurrassic Park: Genesis	Universal Interactive Studios	Shooter	Mar
World Series Baseall 2K3	Sega	Sports	Mar
Evil Dead: A fistful of Boomstick	THQ	Action Adventure	Mar
Midtown Madness 3	Microsoft	Driving	Mar
Last Ninja: The Return	Simon and Schuster	Action Adventure	Mar
Return to Castle Wolfenstein	Activision	Shooter	Mar

Title	Publisher	Genre	Date
Loose Cannon	Ubi Soft	Action Adventure	Apr
Brute Force	Microsoft	Action Adventure	Apr
Run Like Hell	Universal Interactive Studios	Action Adventure	Apr
Godzilla	Infogrames	Fighting	Apr
World's Scariest Police Chases	Empire	Driving	Apr
Mafia	Gotham Games	Action Adventure	Apr

Microsoft Buys Everyone!

Here's a list of companies that haven't been rumored to be bought, or about to be bought, by Microsoft: Amalgamated Zeppelin, Western Groutworks, and United Spats and Congreaves. That's about it. Find your own favorite buyout rumor at www.insertnameofvideogamewebsitehere.com

THE PC PHENOMENON MAKES ITS FIRST FORAY ONTO CONSOLES!

Read all about it in the February issue of EGM.

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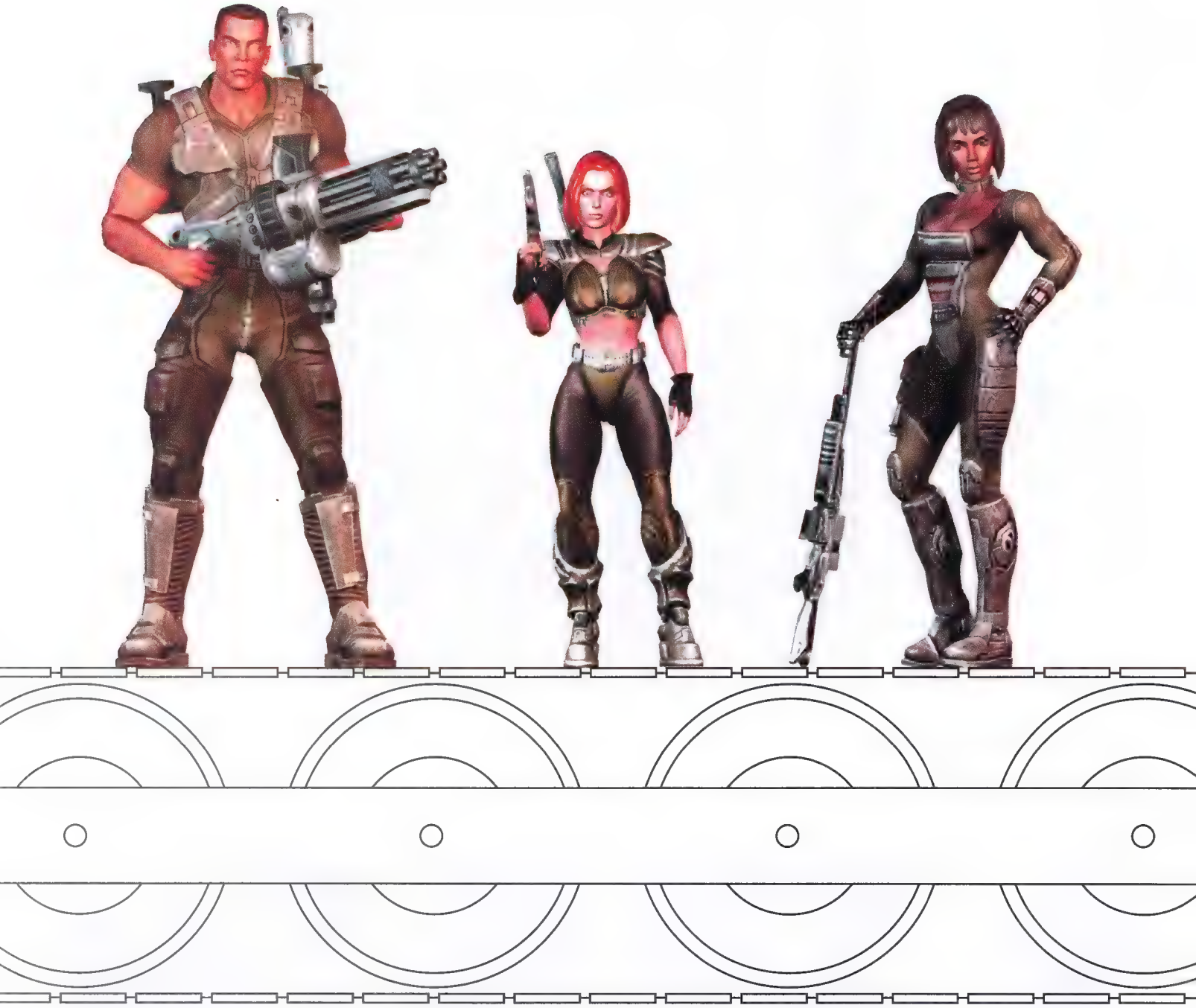
- EXCLUSIVE PREVIEWS OF THE NEW LORD OF THE RINGS: THE TWO TOWERS GAME

REVIEWS:

- BMX XXX (PS2, XBOX, GAMECUBE)
- WAR OF THE MONSTERS (PS2)
- PANZER DRAGOON ORTA (XBOX)
- AND MANY MORE!

ALSO, LOOK FOR EGM #164 FEATURING DRIVER 3 ON-SALE FEBRUARY 4, 2003



Excessive Force

Intelligent A.I., co-op missions, and next-gen graphics. Can *Brute Force* repeat *Halo*'s colossal success?

Words: Che Chou

It's fair to say that Microsoft hasn't had an Xbox game, in any genre, as far-reaching and universal as its brilliant FPS *Halo*. Even with all of its tiny triumphs (in the form of Xbox Live and *MechAssault)* last holiday season, there's an alarming dearth of must-buy first-party titles in the console's library. Enter *Brute Force*, an action shooter that, upon closer inspection, bears all the visual and gameplay trademarks of Microsoft's first (and only) console classic—except with a squad-based co-op twist. As we edge closer to *Brute Force*'s April release date, you can anticipate Microsoft to kick the marketing machine into overdrive for one of its biggest games of 2003. Expect to see these shiny, glossy characters roll off the production line and onto promo posters, kiosks, and store shelves everywhere. With an open mind, a hunger for epic sci-fi action, and our fingers crossed, *Xbox Nation* traveled to Austin, Texas, for an exclusive first hands-on look at what could be one of the finest co-op shooters ever.

Chinese general and philosopher Sun Tzu says, "It's not—What's that sound?—enough to fight a war near an active volcano."

It's a cold, miserable day in Texas, and we're on a quest for food with Austin-based developer Digital Anvil. Leading this fellowship of the starved is Erin Roberts, the bearded, British producer of Microsoft's beaming first-party shooter, *Brute Force*. He's also the only one of us not wearing layers and a jacket on this misty winter afternoon.

Trotting through the city's corporate ghettos, between the empty office spaces hollowed-out by the tanking economy, we get the sense that Roberts is impervious to his environment. "Oh yeah, all of this here was built to house high-tech companies and dotcoms," he tells us, gesturing to the remains of half-constructed business centers looking more like parking structures than dotbomb abortions. "In fact, I think Intel used be around here somewhere," he notes.

Nestled comfortably in this corporate ghost town is the plush studio of Digital Anvil, an oasis of game designers, artists, and programmers that appears just as impervious to its industrial wasteland surroundings. Roberts and his team have been handed the opportunity, by Microsoft, to fill the Xbox's early 2003 gaming void and make *Brute Force* the company's next great first-party title; to produce a game worthy of endless *Halo* comparisons and, possibly, something to tide us over until *Halo 2* reaches store shelves. And let's just get this out of the way early on: *Halo* will be mentioned incessantly throughout, because the parallels are undeniably evident. Everything from the controls, gameplay, and massive outdoor levels to the way *Brute Force* handles its A.I. is a spiritual continuation of what made *Halo* such a great sci-fi romp.

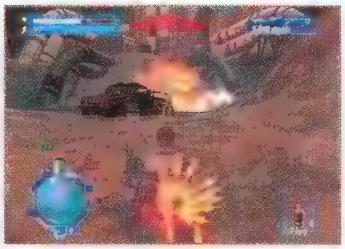
"We never meant for *Brute Force* to be the next *Halo* or anything," Roberts says. "But in terms of whether we're comfortable with the hype that this game will be a *Halo*-killer—absolutely." This declaration to take developer Bungie on at its own game is far from your typical industry challenge, or a chest-thumping battle cry. Since Microsoft owns both companies, the vibe here is more camaraderie than animosity. "I think the studio rivalries are kind of fun," Alan Hartman, studio manager at Digital Anvil says. He believes it makes both teams work that much harder to beat each other to the punch. "It's good to be in the same organization. We get to check out builds of *Halo 2*, and of course, they see *Brute Force* all the time." As an example of how the two studios have been cooperating, Digital Anvil recently "borrowed" the lead gameplay tester who was instrumental in creating *Halo*'s near-perfect controls. "I think they want him back," whispers Tim Fields, lead designer on *Brute Force*, as well as the game's most eloquent spokesperson. "He's going to make sure that our game is every bit as polished as *Halo*. Or kill us first."

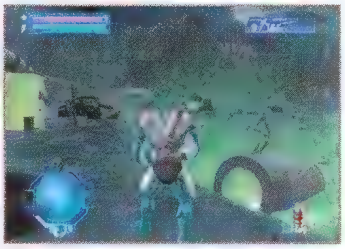
So as a matter of life and death, Digital Anvil decided to push the game's release from the holiday season back to April 2003, in order to polish every aspect to a meticulous sheen. "The big thing for us right now is system link. We needed the extra time to add that in," Roberts says. "We wanted to be responsive to what people were looking for, and we all knew that this game needed system link for its co-op and deathmatch multiplayer." Short of actually residing on Xbox Live, *Brute Force* does what *Halo* does not: allows for multiplayer co-op games with three other players on four separate Xboxes. "If we're going to do this, let's do it right. Let's get system link co-op in there and really give *Brute Force* the polish that it needs," he says.

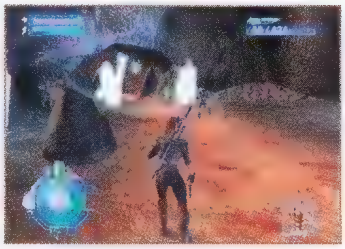
A time of galactic unrest

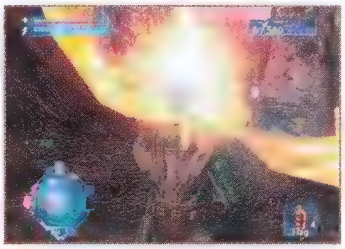
Back in the austere chambers of Digital Anvil, we sit roundtable-style in a conference room while *Brute Force* is projected, bigger than life, onto a white canvas screen. With Fields on the controller and Roberts as master of ceremonies, the presentation begins in earnest. "Story is really central to the game," Roberts explains. "We push the story in a number of ways—

Young Josie searches for the rest of the Pussycats, but finds only trouble.









in the introduction, all briefings, the between-mission cut-scenes—to pull the player through the game."

As much truth as there is in old stereotypes that plot isn't a necessary component for good action gaming, titles such as *Halo* and *Half-Life* have proven that the right storytelling techniques can make any shooter a better shooter. "You mention those two games, and they're definitely pages from books that we've pulled to use in *Brute Force*," Fields says. "In *Half-Life*, for example, you've got the shadowy government guy who shows up throughout the game and propels the player forward. That's a great trick. In *Halo*, they do a good job of inverting the story on you halfway through by introducing the Flood."

According to Roberts, the *Brute Force* narrative will also bear witness to the same techniques. While the team was reluctant to serve up any major spoilers, they confirmed its storyline unravels at some point to reveal shocking revelations about the *Brute Force* universe (although we have our doubts anything could be as FUBAR as trying to plow through the Flood in *Halo*'s Library level).

Brute Force is set several hundred years in the future, where creatures of all species have formed a confederacy of planets, called The Homogeny, to maintain order in the universe. To keep the peace, The Homogeny employs squads of commandos to quash any unwanted uprisings planet side. "The Homogeny believes that whatever protects the confederation is good for the confederation," Roberts says. "Some of the stuff you're asked to perform in these missions isn't exactly upstanding-citizen type material. Sometimes you're asked to kill and assassinate."

So, at some point during the game, our conscience is supposed to kick in and we're supposed to bite the hand that feeds us, right? "Right. The missions seem pretty standard at first, but as you get farther in the game, you start to question the logic of your superiors," Roberts explains. "The Homogeny is kind of like the CIA. If they're out there protecting American interests, then Americans are happy—even if their methods are sometimes quite un-American in practice."

While the plot, with its shadow governments and grassy knolls, certainly sounds intriguing, the same, sadly, cannot be said about *Brute Force*'s squad members, a cast of motley clichés who, to be brutally honest here, seem to come straight out of a bad L. Ron Hubbard sci-fi rag. Subtle character designs are, apparently, not Digital Anvil's strong suit. There's Tex, the heavy-weapons specialist who's a walking, shooting amalgamation of all things Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger. To hammer the point home, Tex even sports a flattop crew cut, as a constant reminder to the player that, yes, this is the guy who's more brawns than brain. Other cardboard cutouts include Flint the sniper, Hawk the scout, and a shamanistic lizard-man by the name of Brutus. Fortunately, these overly simplified character roles translate much better into gameplay than they do as a collective vanguard of mascots for the Xbox. After extensive hands-on time with the game, uninspired character designs seems to be the only major sticking point with what's otherwise shaping up to be an extremely compelling and, if nothing else, dazzling action game.

The screenshots here speak thousands of words, so it's not necessary to comment any further on the game's look...save to say, *Brute Force*'s visual collage of thick, explosive particle effects, painstaking character detail, and large alien worlds marks the arrival of a new

Digital Anvil "borrowed" **Bungie's lead tester** who was instrumental in creating *Halo*'s perfect controls.

May the *Brute Force* be with you, always...

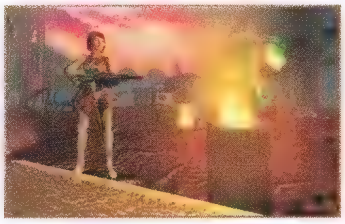
Brute Force accurately renders every weapon in the game in real-time so you always know who's holding and shooting what. Since every character gets to hold two guns, you'll also get to see actual weapon models strapped to his/her/its back. Here, Brutus sports a nasty cutter blade weapon that shoots ricocheting razors for an effect that's downright humorless.

Think of enemies in *Brute Force* as ragdolls that, when subjected to conditions like gunshots or concussions, go flying like so much beef jerky. Using complex arithmetic, *Brute Force* features an advance physics system that accounts for pretty much every character and item in the foreground. Like the battles in *Halo*, every action in *Force* has an appropriate reaction.

When you've got nothing to say and plenty of munitions, sometimes a big-ass, debris-filled explosion is all that's needed to get your point across. This goes double time for *Brute Force*, where mushroom clouds cast heavy shadows over your days. And it's not just the explosions, either; every weapon makes an unique mark on the environment. Bullets kick up dust, while energy weapons burn scars into walls.

Brute Force sweats the details. Sometimes it's good to give the trigger-finger a rest, and take in the glorious sights. Doing so, you'll realize that the big oaf with the minigun here is an actual in-game model. That's right, what you see in this two-page spread is the level of detail happening in an action game that relents for no mere tourist.

The *Brute Force* squad fought mightily against the dirt particle monsters of Grebulon 347, and eventually won the day.



graphical generation on Xbox. Despite all of this technology, however, it's also clear at this stage that the game lacks an aesthetic verve—a luster in the characters' eyes or life to their movements—that would have otherwise elevated *Brute Force* to messiah status. Those looking for signs of life with this game will have to dig deeper—past the eye-candy, and into the heart of its mechanics.

Forceplay

When it came to gameplay, Digital Anvil chose early on not to fix what ain't broke. Nearly every aspect of *Brute Force*'s controls mimics that of *Halo*'s simplistic brilliance. Sure, you're in loose command of up to three other characters, and there's an element of team-based strategy here you won't find in Bungie's much-revered shooter, but on a purely twitch level, *Brute Force* has an uncanny resemblance to *Halo*. Both analog sticks command strafing, turning, and moving, while the shoulder triggers allow you to bust caps and throw grenades. *Halo* veterans will be pleasantly surprised to find everything—from crouching and swapping weapons to jumping and reloading—is mapped to pretty much the same buttons in *Brute Force*.

What inevitably sets *Brute Force* apart from *Halo*, and into a league of its own, is its ability to allow players on-the-fly access to four different characters simultaneously; not just three expendable lives or warm bodies to carry extra guns and ammo, but characters with drastically varied playing styles. Tex, the meathead of the crew, can sling two heavy weapons at once, causing terrible collateral damage to anything in his path. "He's the guy you always want on your front lines, laying down suppressive fire," Roberts says. Flint, the android sniper with an hourglass figure, has a targeting ability that lets her lock onto enemies and dispatch them, one after another, with auto-precision. Those who prefer stealth can get things done with Hawk, a scout who goes unseen, predator-style, and shivs people in the back. Finally, there's Brutus the lizard-man, who looks straight out of G. Gary Gygax's high-school binder doodlings. His schtick is twofold: He can sprint on all fours, and his alien nature lets him heal himself as well as spot enemies in the dark. Adding to *Brute Force*'s cocktail is the fact that, while each character starts with a set of weapons most suited to their specialty, he, she, or it can still pry the guns off the fingers of a cold, dead enemy at any time during the mission.

Still, there's no point in controlling a badass squad if the interface is clunky and generally does more harm than good. To that end, Digital Anvil spent months balancing usability with functionality for its squad-command menu. "There are games out there that let you direct a squad, but none of them do it in the same way we do," Fields says. "*Rogue Spear* [on the PC] was cool because you could geek out on all this tactical stuff, but it was just too hardcore," he adds. "They couldn't make it quick or intuitive." To the credit of much behind-the-scenes hard work, telling teammates in Brute Force what to do, even during the most intense firefights, is surprisingly straightforward. Simply select up to three other units with the D-pad and assign one of four commands: move here, cover me, fire at will, and guard this area. Grabbing the controller and hopping in straightaway, we were pleasantly surprised to see that none of the characters performed like a brain-dead idiot...not even Tex.

The most obvious difference setting *Brute Force* apart from *Halo*, however, is the developer's choice of using third-person perspective to play out the action. According to Roberts, this decision was hardly arbitrary. "Well, we have our reasons. Number one, we wanted to show the characters and really get across their personalities," he tells us. "When characters jump, you want to see them land or roll and dodge bullets. In the first-person, you wouldn't see any of that." But more importantly for Roberts, the use of a third-person camera helps situational awareness and squad control. "If a game lets you control more than one character, you don't want to be within the characters," he says. "You want to

With Brute Force's **dynamic physics system**, anything can happen in the heat of battle.

Tex will never be Queen of the May, but at least he can take his frustrations out on any rock formation in front of him

be outside the characters so you can tell where everybody is and who you're controlling at all times."

Of course, running the gauntlet in the third-person also has its disadvantages. At certain times, due to the way a character can get in-between the camera and your intended target, player models must get phased into transparency. The other issue is line-of-sight. "Since you're not looking from the perspective of the character, you've got to do other things to make the player know that they can see and/or actually hit the enemy they're aiming for," Roberts says. "But I think we've got it down pretty good." To eliminate any line-of-sight ambiguities, in-game crosshairs will turn red to indicate the possibility of a hit.

What you hit your enemies with largely depends on the weapons strewn about the battlefield. To live up to its name, *Brute Force* allows you access to an obscene cache of firearms. This shooter fulfills its end of the video arms deal by providing generous amounts of firepower. "Yes, it's a total pain in the ass to balance 30 weapons," Fields remarks. "The mini-gun, a weapon that Tex gets early on in the game, is a lot of fun because of its rate of fire—and, let's face it, Vulcan-style weapons are just plain cool."

Other goodies include energy rifles, rail guns, shotguns, cutter blades (that ricochet around the room), sniper rifles, silenced pistols, bio-weapons, grenade launchers, rocket launchers, and five different types of grenades. "Bio-weapons are great for crowds," Fields says. "It fires green goo that has [the potential to cause] spontaneous combustion. And if the splash damage from the goo touches another enemy, then they'll also have a chance of exploding." Thanks to the game's unique "rag-doll" physics system, enemies you dispose of perish in the most imaginative (yet believable) ways.

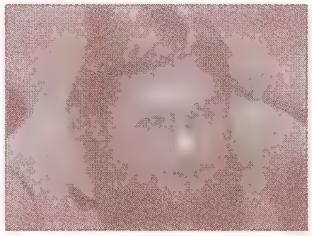
Does it add a whole lot to the gameplay? Not really, but it's hard to deny the rush of watching an opponent get nailed by buckshot, fly backwards, and bounce lifelessly off of walls and structures. After landing a headshot on an enemy sniper up on a ridge, we watched in awe as the target collapsed into a heap and rolled down a hill. With *Brute Force*'s dynamic physics system, there's a real sense that anything can happen in the heat of battle. "You could use grenades to blow enemies into lava pits," Fields says. "If you stagger your enemies with gunshots, you can knock them off of cliffs. It basically makes combat that much more visceral."

One for the team

Squad-based action games need to get smart. Ask anyone who's ever played titles like *SOCOM*, *X-Squad* (both PlayStation 2 titles) or any of the paramilitary workouts from the Tom Clancy franchise, and they'll tell you the genre has three mainstays: guns, more guns, and moronic A.I. For the game designers at Digital Anvil, good A.I. is critical for the immersion process. "Your squad has to always appear as intelligent as you are," Fields says. "They have to be responsive to what you want them to do, even to the point of intuiting what you want them to do in a given situation."

In order to maintain the suspension of disbelief, Roberts and his team spent a tremendous amount of time scripting, tweaking, and perfecting some of the most wicked and unpredictable A.I. encountered yet. Skirmish after skirmish, the *Brute*

Erin Roberts, producer



Having worked on PC games such as *Privateer 2* and *Starlancer*, *Brute Force* producer Erin Roberts joined his brother Chris' games studio, Digital Anvil, when he left EA Europe six years ago. Since the release of his sci-fi equivalent of *Showgirls* (aka *Wing Commander*) debut in theaters two years ago, Chris Roberts has since gone on to Hollywood to pursue the fast life. Erin stayed behind. "It is our first console game," he says. "The Xbox is the first system to come along and level the playing field."

Brutal Concepts

Apparently, it was Design-Your-Own-Game-Character day at Harry S Truman middle school.

Brute Force's Co-op and Deathmatch modes give you full control over every character featured in the game. To give the player plenty of variety, artists at Digital Anvil farmed out the bulk of the character designs to outside contractors while they focused on fleshing out the concept sketches they got back. For the environments, Anvil kept the design work in-house, where trained architects whipped up snappy and exotic landscapes. If concept art is your bag, be sure to read our *Panzer Dragoon Orta* feature on page 98.

Force squad was flanked and flushed out by enemies who put up an impressive show of resistance. "You'll often see stuff that surprises you because the A.I. has such a large set of rules they're working from," Roberts says. "We've even seen enemies take to higher ground and leap down from a ridge for an ambush. That's something we weren't expecting."

Enemy A.I. in *Brute Force* bears similarity to the 'Bots in popular multiplayer shooters such as *Half-Life: Counter-Strike* or *Unreal Tournament* on the PC, except for one fundamental difference: these foes function as a team, with a squad-based hierarchy of command. Whereas most 'Bots are focused on pure run-and-gun patterns on a map, the A.I. enemies in *Brute Force* will actually use team tactics to get the job done. "Enemy squads have a leader type that tells his team 'Okay, you and you, take cover, and you cover me, I'm going to this next point,' and the squad will work like a team, covering their advancing buddies and so forth," explains Roberts. "You can actually see them working as a unit rather than just a bunch of guys running madly around a map."

Those who have experienced the nightmarish soldier encounters in *Half-Life* will have an idea of the A.I.'s persistence in *Brute Force*. "Very few people are doing what you'd call true A.I., where the computer units are actually thinking for themselves," Fields says. "That's not really what you do in games, yet. There are at least 50 different things the A.I. can do at any given time, but we want it to perform one of the five coolest actions on that list. Making them not look stupid is one step, but making them always do something cool is something different altogether."

Due to the complexity of the A.I. and the huge outdoor maps, there's always more than one "correct" way to get through a level. If your action skills are up to snuff, it's technically possible to brutalize your way through the game by using very few team tactics. Your A.I.-controlled squad mates will manage on their own, supporting you whenever possible. Fields points out the obvious option: "You can basically walk through and murder everyone with your machine gun, if you're so inclined."

But like *Halo*, the beauty of *Brute Force*, the soul and essence no amount of glossy character renders or

cutting-edge special effects can quite capture, is its dynamic, open-ended gameplay. As with toys in a sandbox, how you decide to play—whether it's to barge in guns blazing, or to hang back as a sniper and lay down deadly support for your teammates—is ultimately up to you, ensuring that no two people will go through *Brute Force* in the same manner.

Cooperation is mandatory

To give *Brute Force* both replay value and longevity, Digital Anvil is pouring massive resources into refining its multiplayer component. While the game's lack of Xbox Live support is glaring, it's the first console shooter to allow cooperative system link between four players throughout the game's 20-plus mission campaign. "Co-op multiplayer has always been one of the things that we really wanted to do well, even at the very earliest stage of development," Roberts says. "With *Halo*, the percentage of people who played the game via system link was pretty low. But it's so kick ass and everybody loves it, so we decided to really focus on it in *Brute Force*."

What's especially cool is that in system link mode, the game will actually support real-time voice communication via the Xbox Live Communicator headset. "System link is one step of going the online route," Roberts says. "But our code wasn't really set up to deal with issues like latency. At that point, you're not just talking about pushing the project back four or five months—you're talking about pushing the release date back to next Christmas."

The likely way most folks will experience co-op is through *Brute Force*'s innovative Splitscreen mode, where you can hop into and out of games at any time without disrupting its flow. Simply plug a controller (or three) into your Xbox, and the screen will split into halves, thirds or quarters in real-time. And just like in the single-player game, once a character dies, it's out for the duration of the sortie. Provided you have less than a total of four players, co-op mode also allows you and your buddies to zap, at will, into the bodies of other A.I.-controlled characters in your squad.

An additional multiplayer twist comes in the form of eight-on-eight squad-based deathmatch, where you take on another human-controlled team and try to out-strategize each other using techniques you've honed during the campaign. Plus, every creature you meet (and subsequently obliterate) in the game can be unlocked and used during deathmatch. "We're not giving everything away right now, but there are at least 16 creature types, each with its own strengths, weaknesses and special powers," Roberts says. "Every character will have its own unique feel."

In system link mode, **the game supports voice communication** via the Xbox Live Communicator.

Force of will

At this point, it's yet to become clear whether everyone should be excited for *Brute Force*, or genuinely worried that Digital Anvil has bitten off more than it can chew. Everything about the game, from its next-generation visuals to the depth of its A.I., looks to be on track to deliver the best thing since *Halo*. But there are concerns. *Brute Force* still lacks Halo's refinement, which, hopefully will be what the team focuses on for the next four months leading up to the delivery date. During a hands-on test, the game showed all the rough edges of a pre-alpha build such as dodgy framerates, stuttering cameras, and weapons balancing issues. Near the end of an hour long combat mission, Roberts once again seeks to allay any fears: "There is no way that the game will ship with these framerate and camera issues. These problems will simply get fixed."

Provided Digital Anvil can overcome any performance debacles and stay on the path of virtuously good gameplay, *Brute Force* has the potential to enthrall. After a taste of the game's sublime open-ended gameplay, it's impossible not to wonder why the developers chose a name like *Brute Force*, when the game itself encourages such deep strategizing. "Well, we had thought about maybe calling it *Different Kinds of Force*," Fields says with a smirk. "But in the end, maybe it's just a running joke about our programming techniques."

DUALITY

Game Data

Developer : Trilobyte Graphics
Publisher : Phantagram
Expected Release : November 2003
Origin : Spain
"A cyber-being, a hacker, and a mercenary go to a bar...." *Duality* is set in a real-world videogame city and a videogame cyber-realm, where each character has a unique motivation and set of skills.

Somewhere between the real and the virtual, halfway between love and madness, lies the unexplored, underhyped, action adventure *Duality.*

In that mysterious nation known as "Spain," the people at Trilobyte Graphics are quietly toiling on what may be a most impressive Xbox game. It's one of those refreshing "no-hype" situations; scant game assets, in the form of screenshots and a short movie, have trickled out, impressing the hell out of the few people they've reached. Less is more here, and the materials hint at both a grand dynamic and reactive gameplay, something very much expected from this silicon colossus.

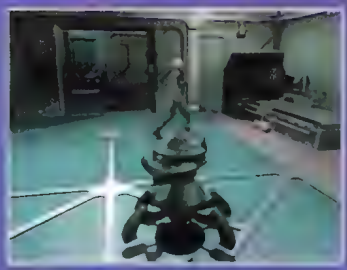
It's called *Duality*, and its concept is simple enough: You play as one of three characters, each with a particular set of missions in the greater context of the overall storyline. The formula, ostensibly, is that of a third-person action/adventure, though the nature of the playable characters allows for some interesting permutations.

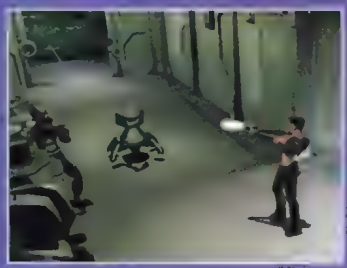
Playable characters include a mercenary, hacker, and cyber-being—and each has its own play style. Aaron Rigby, the game's producer at Phantagram says: "The mercenary is all business, and can easily take the stealth path, or fight his way through. However, don't expect the same from the hacker. She knows how to shoot, but would probably rather sneak or hack her way past a given obstacle. As the cyber-being, it becomes a question of what powers you command in the realm of Cyberspace."

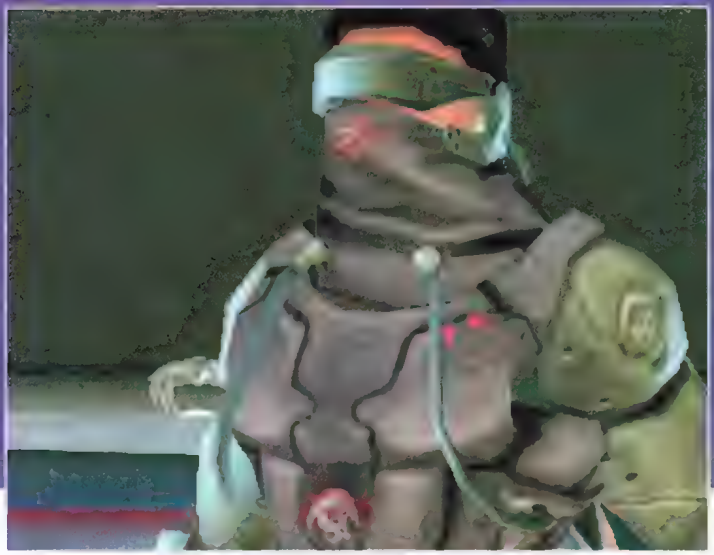
It sounds cut-and-dried, but the concept flourishes in the details. The mercenary will have built-in auto-targeting, reflecting his proficiency in combat. The cyber-being, on the other hand, apart from wielding formidable powers on his native turf, manipulates real-world objects—robots, doors, and security devices—to dispose of physical threats to his virtual existence. The hacker, meanwhile, who lives in the corporeal world but flirts with the virtual, has to protect her body with traps and sensors when on digital excursions.

Not much about the story has been revealed, but each of the characters

...it becomes a question of **what powers you command** in the realm of Cyberspace







☐ It's comforting to know that people in this brave, new world are as dumb as the people in this cowardly, old one. Here's a hint, Brainiac: People generally like to see stuff, and also to breathe air.

☐ In the future, women will carry laser pistols and wear their hair short and tight in an ongoing homage to diva Grace Jones. They will also punch you in the stomach if you sass back.

will have his/her/its own motivation. The mercenary is concerned with finance and, as such, has few scruples. He uses cash to buy implants to augment his combat abilities, though it's uncertain as to what form these implants take. The cyber-being has the most interesting impetus for action: It was once a human scientist whose soul was transferred into cyberspace upon its body's destruction. Its story will involve finding out who or what was responsible for its demise, and the subsequent exaction of vengeance.

As the title implies (with the subtlety of a piledriver), *Duality* is designed around the concept of these two distinct levels of reality. The physical world it's set in is pulled from cyberpunk fiction—it's a harsh, hyper-urban dystopia ruled by soulless megacorporations, populated by desperate, cybernetically-enhanced citizens. It'll take place in one, large city (which Trilobyte hints is an interpretation of New York), with allegedly seamless transitions between interior and exterior spaces. Arguably, it's the aesthetics of the setting that are the most striking; the artists at Trilobyte obviously have a keen sense of design, and this is evidenced by the intricacy of the environments they have created.

To contrast the world of man, *Duality* will also feature the world of machines...a virtual realm, if you will. Things promise to get more interesting in the virtual realm, however. The characters will access this world by means of "portals" throughout the world, them being small pockets of cyberspace designed to their creators' taste. "Each portal in cyberspace is different, but they are the basically the digital representations of the portal designer's idea of heaven, which the player visits with the same ease we visit Web sites today," Rigby says. The exact nature and physical appearance of these portals has yet to be revealed, but given that one of the three characters will exist primarily in cyberspace, they should be at least decently realized.

In any case, *Duality* is due out the in first quarter of 2003. Hopefully, Phantagram will let a bit more information trickle out about the game before too long.

Miguel Lopez

Eat it, cyberpunk

The PC version of *Duality* will have some cool multiplayer features, in which players will have to use their respective abilities to kill each other. Trilobyte plans to have the cyber-being play the role of "game-master" in these Deathmatches. How exactly this works hasn't been revealed, but its potential is exciting. Let's hope it gets some Xbox Live love.

TRUE CRIME: STREETS OF L.A.

Game Data

Developer : Luxoflux
Publisher : Activision
Expected Release : Spring 2003
Origin : Santa Monica, CA
True Crime puts players in the shoes of cop Nick Kang as he serves up leaded justice on the mean streets of Los Angeles. This is Activision's *Grand Theft Auto III*, and here's hoping it proves to be a bit more than that.

It's just another perfect day—we love L.A.! (Except for all the carjackings, beatdowns, and gunfights, that is.) Welcome to Activision's *True Crime*....

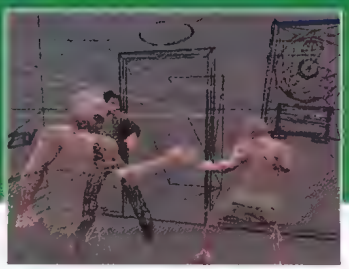
Given the success of *Grand Theft Auto III*, it's logical to assume every large video-game publisher will attempt to make a mint pushing interactive aberrance.

Activision, however, claims to be taking things to the next level. *True Crime: Streets of L.A.* will purportedly be everything *GTA3* is, with a side of bacon—nicer graphics, a more complex game flow, and an actual hand-to-hand fighting system, wherein you can throw dudes onto pinball machines and watch the glass casings crack. Indeed, the whole go-anywhere-do-anything quasi-genre has escalated to a sort of pissing contest, with Electronics Boutique, Babbage's, and your wallet all playing the role of the sidewalk.

Despite the promises and hype, *True Crime*'s most intriguing feature is, at first glance, its most understated. Consequence of action is the name of the game, so if you screw up a mission, you won't necessarily get to try it again. Rather, you'll have to deal with the reprecussions of failure in the context of the game's story; events will change depending on how you perform on certain missions, and the game will branch into one of three separate and distinct endings.

True Crime lets players step into the role of police officer Nick Kang—an Amerasian Hong Kong transplant who moved back to Los Angeles after coming of age. Kang's not exactly a model cop; he was kicked off the squad for using excessive force far too often. There was a concern that being on the right side of the law would prevent players from raising the sort of hell they're used to in these sorts of games, but Dan Archer, *True Crime*'s producer at Luxoflux, nixes this doubt. "Although Nick Kang is an Elite Operations Division detective, he doesn't follow all of the rules," explains Archer. "He was hired to take on the mob, dealing out justice with the business end of twin .45s...pure Hong Kong cinema. Being what some would call a loose cannon, no criminal is safe

While Nick is an honorable detective, players **choose to take the high or the low road** to get the job done.



☐ Fun Fact: Right behind the Staples Center (pictured here) is the Los Angeles Convention Center where the annual Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) has been held for the past several years.

☐ Luxoflux planned to name this game *Wiry: The Wireframe Man,* but decided against it.

☐ Police cop Nick Kang (yes, another *Simpsons* reference) points multiple gats at multiple thugs.

from Nick's unique style of justice. While Nick is an honorable detective, players can choose to take the high road or the low road to get the job done. We let the player decide which road, and how much damage will be done along the way." So, this probably means you'll be able to kill pedestrians. On the other hand, you could go all good cop and stop random crimes occurring on the street. They'll happen as you're minding your own business, and will be governed by the sort reactive mechanics around which the whole of the A.I. is built. Some crooks will be chickens, while others will be full of criminal bravado, running you over, shooting you, and the like. "At this point, the A.I. can make any or all of a number of decisions that are random in nature—depending on the disposition of the perpetrator. He may jump from a vehicle and make a run for it, brandish a weapon and return fire, leave his car and jack another, or simply give up," Archer says.

The developer has used actual global positioning data to map the sprawling streets of Los Angeles, hundreds of square miles that have been re-created in *True Crime*. The whole deal will conform to reality, too (or Luxoflux's notion of it, in any case): "We all live and work in L.A. and are definitely inspired by the city's character almost every day of our lives. We are not creating a fictional world here; we are attempting to recreate the entire culture, look, and feel of Los Angeles. L.A. is the perfect setting for *True Crime* because it has everything: movie stars, riots, hookers, crooked cops, gangland crime—you name it, L.A.'s got it, whether good or bad. When the player drives around in our game, they will effectively be living the life of Nick Kang—a cop on the edge, dealing justice on his own terms in The City of Angels." The real question, though, is, how many beatings and profilings will Kang be subject to before the game's end?

We'll have to wait until *True Crime* sees release to find out—and neither Luxoflux nor Activision's saying anything other than the game will be a 2003 release. You have the right to remain interested until then. If you give up this right, then the terrorists win.

Miguel Lopez

Richard Nixon, true criminal

Richard Milhous Nixon, 37th president of the United States and true criminal, is often remembered for opening trade with China. He's also remembered for such criminal acts as authorizing illegal wiretaps of his enemies' phones, misusing public funds, and being a co-conspirator in the Watergate break-in. Nixon escaped impeachment by resigning the presidency in 1974.

MIDTOWN MADNESS 3

Game Data

Developer : Digital Illusions
Publisher : Microsoft
Expected Release : Spring 2003
Origin : United Kingdom
Drive around in extremely detailed versions of Washington, D.C., and Paris—with a purpose or at your own leisure. There will be more than 27 Career missions, and plenty of vehicular mayhem to be had.

***Midtown Madness 3* brings *Wreckless* driving to the Xbox yet again. While the Live component is alluring, we're hoping for significantly more madness.**

If you play only console videogames, the first two *Midtown Madness* titles might as well have been released on another planet. These PC-exclusive games' claim to fame was their environments, which were living, breathing versions of several noteworthy cities. (The first was based in Chicago, the second took place in both San Francisco and London.) Imagine driving past the Sears Tower, Big Ben, or the Golden Gate Bridge within a game world, then sneaking onto backstreets only locals know about, all the while plowing through traffic, trying to avoid (or perhaps crush) pedestrians, and you've captured *Madness'* appeal.

Although the core gameplay will stay the same in the upcoming Xbox-exclusive third edition of *Midtown Madness*, plenty of changes are planned...not the least of which being the franchise's new developer. Series' creator Angel Studios, which has been bought by Rockstar Games, was replaced by Digital Illusions, the company responsible for Microsoft's much-heralded *Rallisport Challenge,* as well as EA's *Battlefield 1942*.

This time out, the game is set in enormous, hyper-realistic versions of Washington, D.C., and Paris. Digital Illusions' Andreas Roman says, "All of the famous places and monuments are there, as well as [all] the streets and alleyways. We've added and subtracted some things for gameplay reasons, but if you've been to these cities, you'll feel right at home." As such, we expect careening through city traffic, zipping between shouting pedestrians, and smashing shop windows and fruit stands should feel like a trip back to ye olde stomping grounds.

All the previous modes of play return, except for Circuit mode, which has been replaced by the more interesting Career mode. In it, you're an undercover agent masquerading as a taxi driver, paramedic, truck driver, cop, stunt-car driver, and nine others. The game's 27 Career missions involve car

Auto enthusiasts will be glad to know that there are more than **30 real-life cars available...**

Here, cars smash into each other. Perhaps Microsoft should consider a car-insurance sim....

In the build to which *XBN* was privy, graphics needed work; thus far, this is no *Wreckless*.

Andrew "Dice" Clay was running late to pick up his unemployment check and rammed his sport utility vehicle (or, as we refer to them, cars to make bad drivers feel safe) into Gary Coleman's SUV.

chases, special deliveries, crash courses, tail assignments, races where you can't allow your car to take too much damage, and more, each with its own specific vocational twist. Think *Wreckless* and *Super Runabout: San Francisco Edition*, and you'll be on the right track.

"They're pretty wacky," Roman says. "We didn't feel a melodramatic story was the right focus for *Midtown*, so [the missions] are pretty far-out and don't take themselves too seriously. Each job has a few races, and once you've completed them, the story moves on and you're on to the next job—your next cover, so to speak. It's also in the Career mode where you unlock some of the coolest cars in the games."

Other modes include Blitz, where you race against the clock; Checkpoint, where you race against other drivers; and Cruise, where you leisurely drive around and explore. In Cruise mode, you can even alter the amount of traffic, pedestrians, and police present (they'll chase you if you break any traffic laws).

Auto enthusiasts will be glad to know that there are more than 30 real-life cars available, including the Dodge Viper, Corvette Z06, Hummer H2, an old Renault 5 (with turbo), and the new BMW Mini Cooper. "It's all in there, and no single vehicle can win the entire game," Roman says. "You'll have to make important tactical choices between races."

Madness 3's most promising feature is its online multiplayer modes, which include the aforementioned Checkpoint and Cruise; the self-explanatory Tag; Hunter, where you chase multiple targets; Stayaway, where you're on the run, and Capture the Gold, where you snag loot and try to return it to your base. Expect Xbox Live downloadable cars, races, and possibly more in the future.

Truth to tell, our main concern with *Madness 3* is that it won't end up as sharp-looking or dynamic as Activision's *Wreckless* or Rockstar's *Midnight Club 2*; the last time we saw a build of the game, its graphics still needed a lot of work. Visuals aside, *Madness 3*'s online component could make it another solid Xbox Live entry. Look for it this spring.

Joe Fielder

Monumental!

When Microsoft's reps showed off an early version of *Midtown Madness 3*, they revealed a truly cool feature. Players can take their cars and drive them into various monuments, including the Thomas Jefferson Memorial. Old Tom looks great on Xbox, and players who manage to drive on to this sacred ground will be awarded a special power-up.

SUDEKI

Game Data

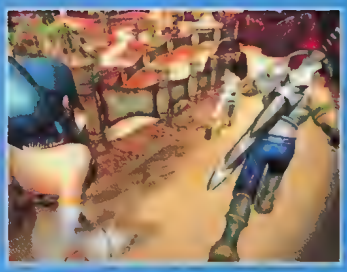
Developer : Climax UK
Publisher : Microsoft
Expected Release : Winter 2003
Origin : Great Britain
A fresh take on the action RPG genre packed with groundbreaking A.I., copious amounts of bump-mapping, and sparkly spell-effect pizzazz. A much-needed console RPG on a console with, er, no console RPGs.

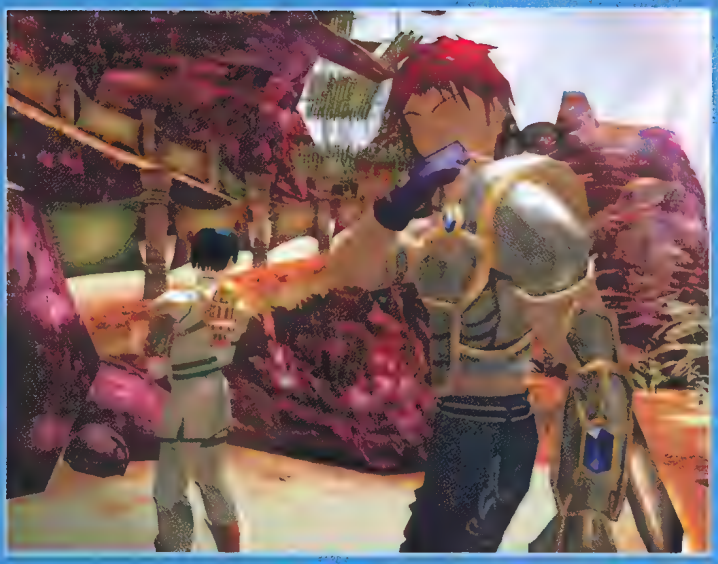
"A Japanese RPG from a U.K. developer?!" the skeptics proclaim. Suffice it to say, Climax has much to prove with its ambitious first-party RPG.

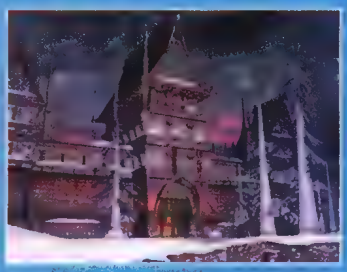
Microsoft wowed the crowds at its X02 preview event in Spain with a short reel of *Sudeki*, a new, Xbox-exclusive action RPG with a distinct, anime-inspired look. In fact, the game borrows so heavily from the Japanese anime aesthetic that some less-informed sources erroneously reported that it's the work of the Japanese Climax (creator of such Sega Genesis classics as *Landstalker* and *Shining Force*) when, in reality, it's being developed by the British Climax, the company that created *Rally Fusion* and *Moto GP* for Xbox. Of course, the game looks fabulous on a demo reel, but how does it actually play? After a solid session with an extremely early alpha copy, our interest is definitely piqued.

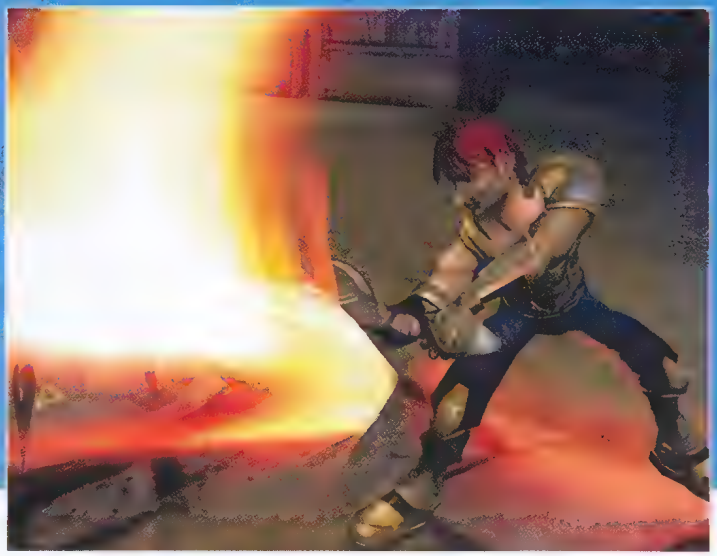
At this early stage, the plot is still largely under wraps, but rest assured that it involves a magical realm torn asunder by an unholy evil that must be thwarted. While the plot remains nebulous, the game's four heroes leap defiantly from the screen. You'll control a party consisting of a valiant swordsman, a crafty gunslinger, a sultry huntress, and an even sultrier sorceress. (The determined sex appeal of the female characters is impossible not to notice; the sheer amount of bouncing cleavage is enough to make the *Dead or Alive* ladies blush.) The characters look as if they've wandered in from some raucous Japanese cartoon, and with good reason. "Anime is a core style focus of *Sudeki*," explains Climax's Tuomas Pirinen. "We are fortunate to have award-winning anime artists on our concept and design team." The developers are also open about borrowing ideas from Japanese games: "We definitely take inspiration from classics like *Final Fantasy* and *Zelda*," Pirinen says. "We've always been impressed by the amazing art of *Final Fantasy* and the free-roaming aspects of *Zelda*. For combat, we looked closely at games such as *Devil May Cry*, and [we] seek to give users a visceral, satisfying, and

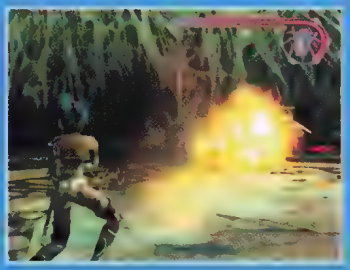
The **sheer amount of bouncing cleavage** is enough to make the *Dead or Alive* ladies blush....

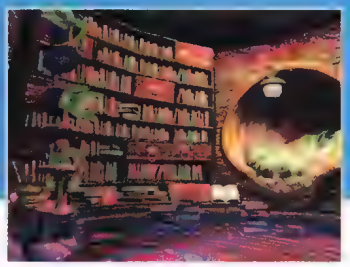












Too many pinto beans ultimately spelled doom for our hero. His body lies unclaimed.

As with nearly all first-party Xbox releases, *Sudeki* makes use of a variety of hardware-based special effects. The dynamic lighting, even in the early build we saw, was very impressive.

ProTip: Read all these books to gain a better understanding of the human condition.

exhilarating feeling from the unique combat system."

Big-eyed characters, furiously fast gameplay, and pink hair aren't the only aspects borrowed from Japanese gaming. The real-time, action-oriented RPG combat alongside computer-controlled party members lifts key elements from Square classics, ranging from *The Secret of Mana* to recent-hit *Kingdom Hearts*. "Each player-character has multiple A.I. settings that you can change at any time to manage their behavior when you are not actively guiding them yourself," Pirinen says. "Characters have different attributes and skill sets that you may want to use in the appropriate circumstances." This way, you can be slashing away with your swordsman while the sexy sorceress spews some fire, the huntress feeds you an herb, and the gunslinger pumps some lead into the baddie sneaking up on you. Of course, you can always take matters into your own hands; should you really want to do things your way in battle, you can easily switch control to any character whenever you want and have the A.I. for the character you just switched from resume the fight.

During the fights, you must jam on the buttons to attack, but if you want to cast spells or issue commands to your A.I.-controlled party members, the game switches to a super slow-motion mode while you navigate the menus. Pirinen elaborates: "The game never actually stops—the attacks continue, and you still need to execute on your attacks quickly, but with enough time to make decisions like 'Which spell will I cast?' or 'Which potion will I use?' The additional benefit is that you can witness some of the really cool moves in a sort of *Matrix*-style slow motion while preparing for the next attack."

The developers promise a good 25-30 hour quest packed with dungeons to explore, treasure to discover, and medieval mammaries to ogle. In addition to the solid single-player experience, Pirinen says "wait and see" on the possibilities of multiplayer combat and Xbox Live downloadable content. Even if these features don't make it in, however, *Sudeki* is primed to nicely fill the gaping action RPG hole on Xbox.

Shane Bettenhausen

What's it all mean?

The name "Sudeki" seems like it must be ripe with some deep, portentous meaning, but in reality, it's made-up nonsense, sort of like the "moon" landing, the "moon," non-stick cookware, and Ronald Reagan. Even in Japanese, the word is totally bogus. It sounds a lot like "suteki," which is a slang term for "cool."

RETURN TO CASTLE WOLFENSTEIN

Game Data

Developer : Nerve Software
Publisher : Activision
Expected Release : March 2003
Origin : Mesquite, TX
In this latest installment of the *Wolfenstein* series, hero B.J. Blaskowicz returns to shoot more Nazis. This will mark the well-loved series' first appearance on Xbox, and it will come with online play.

It's been too long, and we're glad that Nazi-shooting he-man B.J. Blaskowicz is back. Parting was sweet sorrow, but the return may be glorious ...

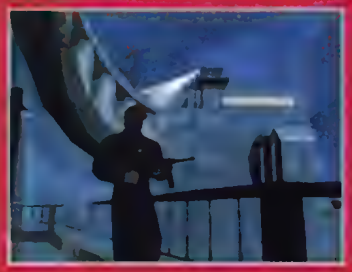
To the point: The only good Nazi, real or built from pixels, is a well-ventilated Nazi. Activision and developer Nerve Software are taking this philosophy to heart with *Return to Castle Wolfenstein: Tides of War*—a first-person shooter hearkening back to a simpler time when fascists tried to rule the world and good Americans shot them.

Tides of War was built from the foundation of the well-loved PC-hit *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, itself a sequel to such classic PC titles as *Wolfenstein 3D* and *Castle Wolfenstein*. Set during the dark days of WWII, *War* puts players in the role of hardened gunsmith and Army Ranger B.J. Blaskowicz as he attempts to rid the world of many a Nazi while simultaneously foiling the evil schemes of Adolf Hitler's occult-obsessed lickspittle Heinrich Himmler. Activision, well aware of this game's rich lineage, offers the following warning to players: Do not expect a quick-and-dirty, no-frills port. The Xbox translation of the game will be handled by Nerve Software, and its president, Brandon James, says *Tides of War* will feature "tons of additions."

The bratwurst and beer flow freely at Schroeder's, a German eatery in San Francisco where Activision and Id Software mucky-mucks show off *Wolfenstein* for Xbox, PC, and PlayStation 2. While the masses mingle and make merry, James holds sway over a series of linked Xboxes showing off *Tides of War*. "We really haven't cut anything or changed anything," he says about the game's transition from PC to Xbox. James says that without hesitation that the PC graphics translated to Xbox perfectly, pointing out at every turn the specific shader and vapor effects that remain intact. He adds the controls have similarly been tuned, and players can customize their settings or use a *Halo*-style configuration. To cater to FPS neophytes and pros alike, *War* also sports settings for both manual and auto aiming.

All of the levels from the PC version

this drooling and snarling **German shepherd/scrap metal** hybrid is quite unsettling...



Fun Fact: These Germans can't be appeased, but they can be shot with many different guns.

Surf Nazis Must Die! Here we see Fritz, a totally gnarly surf Nazi who likes long walks on the beach, listening to "Yes, We have no Bananas," and totally wearing baggy pants. He's so dreamy!

remain intact, but James and Nerve have created an all-new prologue for the Xbox version that expands the game's play. An Xbox exclusive Cooperative mode allows two players to run through the game as Blaskowicz and operative Agent One via splitscreen. Full Dolby 5.1 sound has been included in the game and, perhaps most significantly, *Tides of War* will support 16-player online action via Xbox Live. New multiplayer maps have been added for the game, and Nerve has added new weapons and items such as a shotgun and a holy cross for dispatching the undead.

Pretty in a pretty creepy sort of way, *War* features burnt-out cities perfect for sniping, defiled churches, airbases, dank and watery catacombs, and weapons factories. Dim lighting and bump-mapping contribute greatly to the game's ominous feel, and one look at the game's various (and hideous) enemies is enough to instill a mild sense of dread. At one point, Blaskowicz will tour Castle Wolfenstein's X-Labs, where biomechanical horrors are being built—and the X-Shepherd makes its gruesome debut. "It's really hard to look at," James says. "It's very disturbing." And, sure as death and taxes, this drooling and snarling German shepherd/scrap metal hybrid with the chain gun on its back is quite unsettling.

A powerful multiplayer option lets players shoot it out in team-based action, and this feature may hold the game's great appeal. Players can choose to fight as the Axis powers or as the Allies; 16 players can compete at once, and each player can choose one of four occupations. Each fighter— be he medic, lieutenant, soldier, or engineer—has access to different weapons and performs specific battlefield tasks: soldiers can wield two-handed weapons, medics heal wounded soldiers and revive dead ones, engineers use (and defuse) dynamite, and lieutenants call in air strikes or artillery bombardments. Lag permeated the multiplayer mode on the night Activision showed off *War*, but it's expected that such details will be dealt with before the game's release sometime in March 2003.

Greg Orlando

God gets the cleaning bill

In the grand ranking of fun things to shoot, Nazis rank a highly respectable second, losing out only to zombies. Now the standard caveat applies: We refer only to shooting things in the context of videogames; zombies are creatures of fantasy and, as such, can hardly expect to retain their coveted status in the real world.

RAYMAN 3: HOODLUM HAVOC

Developer Dossier

Developer : Ubi Soft
Publisher : Ubi Soft
Expected Release : March 2003
Origin : France
Ubi Soft is hoping its strange hero can finally hit the mainstream, and it's fair to say it's pulled out all the stops...*Rayman 3* barely misses a technical or graphical trick in its nearly three years of development.

All with the goodness and not so much with the badness, Mr. Man has provided the world with two beautiful adventures. Now, it's time for a third.

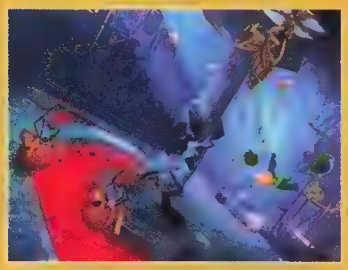
No arms, no legs, no respect. Whatsit Rayman has returned for his second Xbox adventure, and for perhaps his finest effort to date. The original was one of the late 2D era's prettiest and most challenging games, but never quite got the recognition it deserved. With *Rayman 3: Hoodlum Havoc*, Ubi Soft is hoping its strange little hero can finally hit the mainstream.

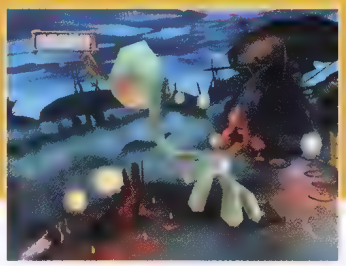
If it doesn't happen, it won't be for lack of trying. *Rayman 3* has been in development for more than three years. According to Ahmed Boukhelia, *Rayman 3*'s producer, "We started in October '99, just after finishing the last one. We hardly got a break." To begin with, Ubi Soft pumped up the game's already considerable personality, giving voices to the characters for the first time, with such A-list talent as Billy West (*Ren & Stimpy*) and John Leguizamo (*Ice Age*). "In the last game," Boukhelia explains, "[Rayman] made these little grunts and odd sounds. It was funny, but voice is better."

Rayman runs loose in roughly eight different settings, from green, leafy woods to the more industrial setting of a rather fanciful factory, and there are also nine bonus levels to unlock. While most of *Havoc*'s gameplay revolves around traditional platform action, it occasionally offers other challenges, breaking things up a little. These range from the bizarrely psychedelic "SK8" level, in which Rayman hops between tracks rhythm-action style to pounding disco beats, to a bit of tailgunning, to chasing one of his wayward shoes around, in a bit of chicanery we like to call "kart-racing." Also, each of the bonus levels are deliberately designed as *Rayman*-themed take-offs to classic games ("Tributes," Boukhelia insists, please call them tributes."), including *Commando*, *Sentinel*, and the original 2D *Rayman*.

Rayman's enemies, the hoodlums of the title, are also a bit smarter than your average baddie. Boukhelia says, "One of our programmers, who does the A.I., he is crazy about *Half-Life*.

If there's one thing you can consistently say about French designers, **they've got style to burn....**





Hoodlums, beware! There's nothing so imposing as a limbless videogame mascot.

Middle: Rayman trips through a groovy minigame. Give peace a chance! Ah, France.

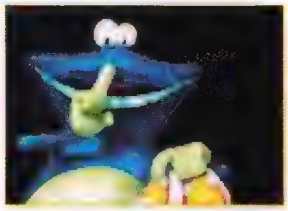
Look! Up in the sky! It's a bird, it's a plane, it's...what the hell is Rayman anyway? Here, the cute hero and idol to millions zips across the skies with his Throttle Copter.

'*Half-Life*, *Half-Life*—everything must be like Half-Life!' He just goes on about it." So, the developers created the HAVOK System (Hoodlum Activity Vector Orientation Control). This somewhat cumbersome acronym covers the fact that each distinct type of hoodlum (15 in all) has a distinct personality, as well as smart, even self-coordinated behavior. They take advantage of elevation, set ambushes, attempt to flank and out-maneuver our hero, and make the occasional wisecrack.

To combat them, Rayman has been given some additional powers, which are not only good for dispatching hoodlums, but also opening up new areas. These include the Vortex Fist, which shoots out small tornadoes, and the Heavy Metal Fist, useful for both bashing bad guys and breaking down barriers. The Lock Jaw is a grappling hook, while the Throttle Copter is basically a better version of Rayman's own, innate helicopter ears. The Shock Rocket, a missile that can be guided through portals and corridors and into enemies ("It's our Sniper Mode," Boukhelia jokes), rounds out the list. Each of these power-ups runs for a limited amount of time or has a limited number of uses, which should require either quick reflexes or serious strategy to get around most obstacles.

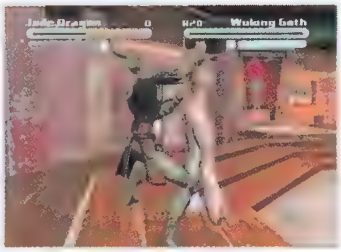
It all looks terrific—if there's one thing you can consistently say about French designers, is that they've got style to burn. *Rayman 3* uses Ubi's new Spritegen system, a method of laying small, 3D objects into the environment with very little cost to graphics processing power. This even includes a number of miscellaneous critters, like bugs, and birds, constantly hopping and fluttering in the background.

Xbox audiences can also look forward to Dolby 5.1 sound, and small graphical enhancements, mostly in improved glow, fog, and reflection effects. Porting the game to Xbox—from its original design platform, PlayStation 2—has resulted in some unexpected hurdles, too. "Xbox is so much faster!" Boukhelia decries. "We've had to tune everything back, like, half as fast!"



Rayman's sidekick, Globox, is addicted to plum juice. If you can get Rayman to uncover a barrel of the juice, Globox promptly downs it, then has an episode of what we will diplomatically term "gastric distress." Gross.

Live on the set of *Tao Feng: A Tale of Tantric Sex and Corny-Ass Character Design*



The most impressive thing about *Tao Feng* is the characters' integration with their environment

TAO FENG

Break a leg with John "Mortal Kombat" Tobias' new (and quite shiny) Xbox fighter *Tao Feng*

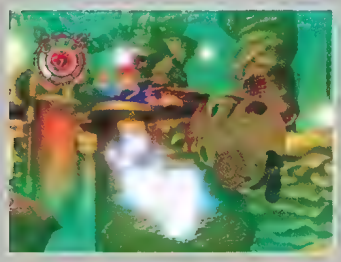
While *Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance* enjoys the fruits of resurrection under the vision of creator Ed Boon, series cocreator John Tobias has forged his own video dojo with *Tao Feng*, set for release this March. Exclusive to Xbox, *Feng* tones down the ridiculous gore and fatalities of *Kombat* to focus on realism. While these screenshots, what with their bodacious kung-fu babes and cybernetic Shaolin monks, may not betray the game's authentic approach to real-life fisticuffs, there's a strange, violent logic at work here.

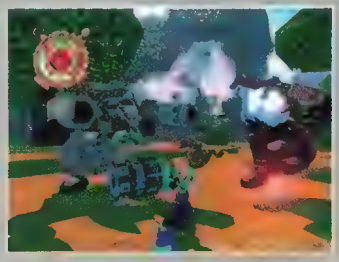
Repeatedly wailing on an opponent's limbs, for instance, will result in breakage, a condition that limits the moves and damage the victim can dish out. Likewise, take a beating and a character model will show cuts, bruises, and other unsavory wounds. The game's stages, made rather mundane by locales such as rooftops and arcades, are also interactive. Whereas games such as *Dead or Alive 2* let you smash enemies against walls and through windows, *Feng* ups the ante with environments containing poles to swing around, items such as arcade machines to smash, and pillars or walls to bounce off of for extra damage.

Lastly, there's the business of Chi powers. Each character has a Chi meter which fills up during the match. When the meter becomes full—yup, you guessed it—it's time for to unleash a special attack, be it in the form of fireballs or a raging combo. Chi energy can also be used to heal a character's limb damage and restore some of his health.

While we certainly won't get behind the game's rather soulless character designs, and a recent hands-on showed that it still needed a great deal of gameplay balance adjustment, *Feng* certainly has potential.

Hell, we're just glad it isn't the putrid bowl of video gruel *Kakuto Chojin* all over again.



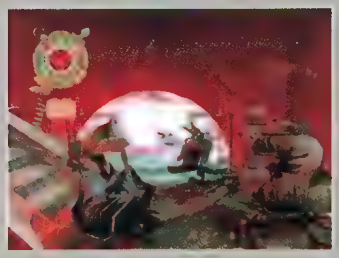


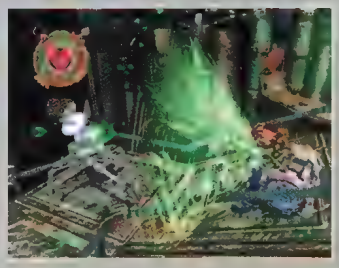
MALICE

In development since before the advent of entertainment itself, the action-platformer *Malice* should see its release sometime before the End Times with all its sinner smiting and whatnot. The game's sassy, weapons- and magic wielding heroine Malice will be voiced by rockin' rocker Gwen Stefani, the lead singer of No Doubt, and her band will contribute three songs to the game's soundtrack.

"It's more an action/adventure game based around combat," Sam Baker, the game's producer says. "What it offers is a completely immersive, jaw-droppingly-mad game-world, full of wonderful and surreal characters wrapped around a time-twisting storyline. The weaponry and magic provide the unique elements, which push the gameplay, if not forward, then definitely sideways."

And here's the part where *Xbox Nation* laments many, many things about the game, but nonetheless attempts to sound optimistic with the sincere hope the developers will fix whatever's wrong before *Malice* ships to unsuspecting game fans who may buy it, play it, and finally go out and punch people in the groin in their subsequent anger and frustration. Our fingers are crossed.





BIG MUTHA TRUCKERS

County Ma Jackson, owner of Big Mutha Truckers, Inc., has told her four kids she's retiring; the task, then, is to prove that you are a worthy successor by out- stealing, cheating, and driving your rednecked siblings. More dynamic than one might expect from a title involving cargo competitions, endless highway driving, and motorcycle thug pulping, *Truckers*' open environment allows one to drive to any of its towns on any given day, à la *Grand Theft Auto III*. Eutechnyx, whose *Test Drive Le Mans* provided a surprisingly solid driving experience, is developing. Although hardly awe-inspiring, *Xbox Nation* was pleased to note that *Truckers* appears to offer some depth to its ostensibly shallow experience.

THE LAST NINJA

Well, he's not really the *last* ninja, but you get the idea. This PC classic is reinvented for Xbox ...

Ah, ninjas. Is there nothing they cannot better with their mere, sword-swinging, stealth-killing antics? The videogame industry would shrivel and die without them. So, we're hoping that the title of *The Last Ninja*, a chop-socky fighter with puzzle-solving elements and emphasis on stealth, is simply a misnomer.

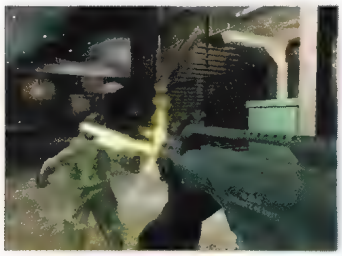
The Last Ninja (who first saw action on the Commodore 64), out to right various wrongs, rescue the woman, and perhaps even cure acne, employs both destructible weaponry such as swords and poles, as well as magic. He'll be able to duke it out with his various foes, too, but won't necessarily have to defeat every enemy he comes across.

Cool magical effects include a doppleganger, which remains motionless but somehow fools enemies into attacking it, and a spirit sphere. The spirit sphere, when activated, causes the Last Ninja to kneel down, as if in prayer, and separate his astral self from his body. In astral form, our hero can detect demons, ghosts, and other supernatural spirits. It's possible—but not yet decided—that the Ninja might be able to possess foes while in this state, and may need to employ an ally to watch his unguarded (and thus vulnerable) human form.

An early version to which *Xbox Nation* was privy was rather intriguing, and hinted strongly at eventual goodness. It will be possible to sneak about and whack enemies with special stealth kills, such as when the Ninja slides his sword across an oblivious enemy's throat. This sneakiness also allows our antihero to avoid certain battles and escape certain traps. Solid graphics round out the package and, with luck, this *Ninja* will be afforded the development time it requires. It's currently set release sometime in the summer of 2003.

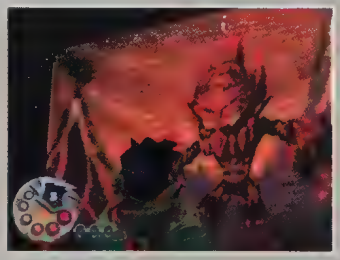
The Last Ninja meets up with The Last Shoeless Man and we expect a fight.

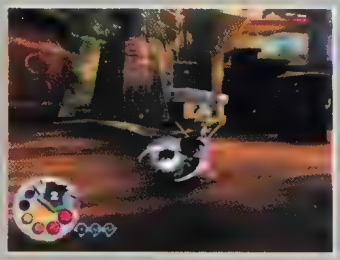
Having spent weeks preparing for the attack, Wu-Ping realizes that he has forgotten his hands.

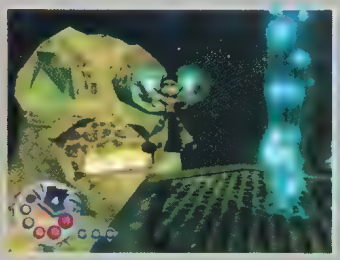


SWAT: G.S.T.

In 2018, America's Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) brigade goes freelance, hiring out its muscle to companies and countries in need. Why? We're not sure, but we suspect it's got something to do with getting paid. To help them get rich, you play as a former Delta Force operative who must work together with two fellow squad members to diffuse all manner of international crises. It's worth noting that *SWAT: Global Strike Team* will allow you to shout commands at your teammates via the Xbox Live Communicator while you're blasting away. Like most first-person shooters, *SWAT* is generous with multiplayer options, supporting both co-op and deathmatch modes. The game is slated for a Fall 2003 release.







VEXX

Like characters in other platformers, the eponymous Vexx is cute and cartoony. He is literally bright-eyed, although not tailed, bushy or otherwise. Unlike those other characters, he eschews jumping on his enemies' heads in favor of slashing them with the wickedly sharp magical gauntlets that have permanently bound themselves to his hands.

Vexx's talons allow him to scale certain walls, propel himself like a torpedo underwater and, of course, to deliver pain to foes in a satisfying variety of ways, including uppercuts, air juggles, and a radiating ground shock delivered while jumping.

While *Vexx* has the expected item collection and jumping puzzles, it improves on the tried and true formula with truly huge environments (which change with the game's day/night cycle), an impressive menagerie of enemies, and dozens of hidden areas and minigames.

The game takes place in some otherworldly location that looks more like a collection of terrestrial chunks and asteroids than a planet. The floating boulders are not merely background; they move about and collide with each other, sometimes breaking into smaller chunks. (A nod to *Asteroids*, perhaps?)

Vexx may well fill the niche between traditional kiddy platformers and the more mature *Ratchet & Clank* and *Psychonauts*. Its story is deeper and darker than the *Spyro* and *Rayman* games, and Acclaim promises a degree of interactivity with the environment never before seen in the genre (such as a giant's salt shaker, which can be toppled and broken). These elements, along with its fine controls, make *Vexx* a compelling prospect; the platformer is a delicate artform, however, and *XBN* is not yet entirely convinced. Look for a review next issue.

Independence was lost when the Tires & Tubes store sold its last piece of rubber.

With *Freedom*, EA looks to stake its claim in the shooting communists simulator (SCS) genre.

FREEDOM: LIBERTY CITY

We hold these Truths to be self-evident, even in a Communist-controlled United States....

Sure to please fans of Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto III* and Red paranoia alike, EA's *Freedom: The Battle for Liberty City* works off of the premise that the Soviet Union won the Cold War, and now fierce conflict is unfolding in the streets of the United States. A nuclear missile has been unleashed on Washington, D.C., and Red Army troops are pouring across the borders of Mexico and Canada. American citizens are informed that their president has been killed, and the Russians have invaded the country. Chaos sets in and, unsurprisingly, you are set to lead the charge.

Players take on the role of, to quote verbatim from the game's press release, "A mild-mannered, blue-collar worker who evolves into a charismatic and fearless freedom fighter obsessed with finding and freeing his brother, who has been taken hostage along with other New Yorkers by the Soviets." We'd say we were waiting anxiously to find out what happens at the conclusion of this complex allegory of Good vs. Evil, but then we would be lying. So we won't.

In terms of actual gameplay, *Freedom* promises multiple layers: a strategic, turn-based mode centering on base operations in an underground sewer system, and an action mode unfolding in the streets, where battles are won or lost and resources are captured. A charisma-based recruiting system is also planned, giving players points for rescuing prisoners or capturing key installations (or taking them away if fellow freedom fighters are sent into battle and killed). IO Interactive is developing; after a solid showing with *Hitman 2*, we're interested to see what it can do with its new-found *Freedom*.

EVIL DEAD: A FISTFUL OF BOOMSTICK

When the *Necronomicon ex Mortis* (source of all the trouble in the three *Evil Dead* films) is discovered in Ash's hometown, he must dust off his modified chainsaw and come out of retirement to fight the horde of possessed zombies created by, and drawn to, the evil tome.

Luckily, Ash has all the tools he'll need to turn the Deadites into the just plain dead, such as clubs, blades, a shovel, a Gatling gun, a chainsaw, moxie (lots of it) and, of course, the 12-gauge double-barreled Remington, S-Mart's top of the line, which you can find in the sporting goods department. *A Fistful of Boomstick* also allows Ash to learn spells that help him defeat the undead with characteristic aplomb.

Boomstick's developer, VIS Interactive, created the recent *State of Emergency*, so we expect bloody mayhem aplenty. The carnage takes place during four distinct time periods in Dearborn, MI., where swarms of Deadites (up to 50 onscreen simultaneously) await their final rest.

Ash wields two weapons at once, while an intuitive targeting system allows him to perform stylish maneuvers like the over-the-shoulder boomstick blast. He'll be authentically voiced by Bruce Campbell as he delivers his famous taunts in-game.

We certainly hope that *Boomstick* improves upon the Dreamcast's dismal *Evil Dead: Hail to the King*, which made us want to gnaw off our own hands such that we couldn't possibly play it anymore.

OUTLAW VOLLEYBALL

Manly woman Natasha shaves her armpits and then her face. Greasy lothario El Suave wears a thong bikini so tiny it wouldn't conceal the period at the end of this sentence. No, nothing is sacred in *Outlaw Volleyball*, and to this we can simply say: *Spike or Die.*

Outlaw Volleyball: Spike or Die, a sort of malcontent's Land of Chocolate, comes from Hypnotix, developer of the surprise Xbox hit *Outlaw Golf*. The game features 16 degenerate spikers, multiple stages, and online play with Xbox Live. Goofy and potentially warping to young minds, *Volleyball* does volleyball so wrong it couldn't be more right.

NBA STREET VOLUME 2

The king of the pavement returns in style; hoops legends, classic hip hop, and DJ Cucumberslice

"This redefines the meaning of in your face," grins producer Wil Mozell as he bounces the ball off of the face of a digital Bill Walton, stunning him for a moment, and then pounding through the lane for a predictably high-flying dunk with a side order of absurdity.

The premise has changed little since *NBA Street*'s initial incarnation: Compete in three-on-three street games with real NBA players, employ a variety of decidedly over-the-top dribble moves and dunks, and talk more trash than Chris Tucker on amphetamines. Included alongside the assortment of original characters and current NBA stars are 25 NBA legends, including Dr. J, Magic Johnson, Larry Legend, and Michael Jordan. A host of new venues, ranging from Rucker Park to Lincoln College, have also been rendered in exquisite detail.

Not content to rest on its laurels, EA Big has implemented an entirely new graphics engine for this sequel; using realistic textures courts and environments, and then stylized, pseudo cel-shaded players, the game manages a distinctive visual tone. Legendary New York City DJ Bobbito will be handling the in-game commentary, while the soundtrack dips into the early '90s golden era of hip hop, with classics from Black Sheep, Pete Rock, and C.L. Smooth alongside a assortment contemporary chart toppers and underground heads.

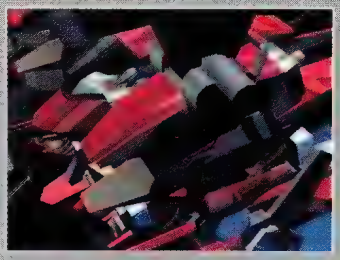
Look for *Volume 2* in March or April, and be glad you own an Xbox: EA promises that the console's four controller ports and on-board hardware effects (read: bump-mapping) will be taken advantage of, meaning this could be the single best iteration of the game yet.

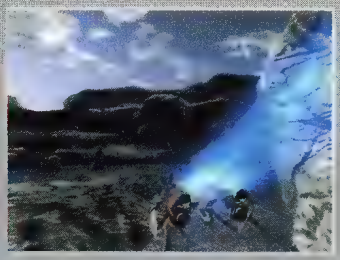
While the game is not yet in its final form graphically, *Vol. 2* already plays quite well.

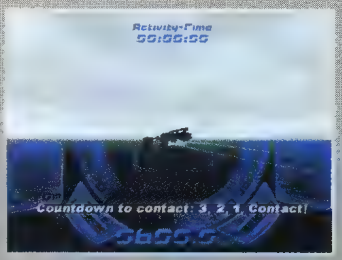
Ziff Davis Media has renamed this magazine *Xbox Nation Volume 2*. More razzle, less azzle.

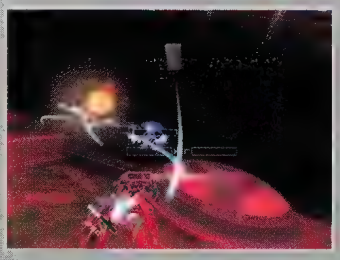
KUNG-FU CHAOS

<Gonnnnnnnnnng> One part *Power Stone*, one part *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, and six parts culturally offensive, Microsoft's *Kung Fu Chaos* is a "party" game like *Silence of the Lambs* is a "cooking" film. The story has the slanty-eyed Shao Ting directing a new kung-fu flick; taking the role of the movie's actors, up to four players vie (read: fight) for screen time on a series of parodical sets. The stages are in a constant state of deterioration, which is clearly the game's most distinguishing trait; girders fall, boxes break, and lots of things go boom throughout the course of each match. It's outrageous! It's crazy! It's...wait...no, it's not.









MURAKUMO

In the Land of the Rising Sun, the word murakumo refers to the strange occurrences in life that seem to have no Earthly explanation: David Hasselhoff's popularity on any continent, The New Kids on The Block, and fat-free potato chips that are more harmful to humans than fat-filled potato chips.

Depending on the context of how it's used, however, the word can also refer to the practice of flying sleek, high-tech mechs low and fast through Tokyo's dense maze of glass and concrete. As can probably be deduced from these screenshots, *Murakumo*, which hits stores in February, refers to the latter usage.

Described as a "high-speed chase action game," the game drops you on the six of renegade drones who would like nothing more than to start a robotic race riot. The objective is to destroy the rogue drone before it reaches its destination, somewhere in the vast urban landscape.

During the pursuit, which typically lasts five to 10 minutes long, flashing directional arrows onscreen keep the player focused on the task at hand.

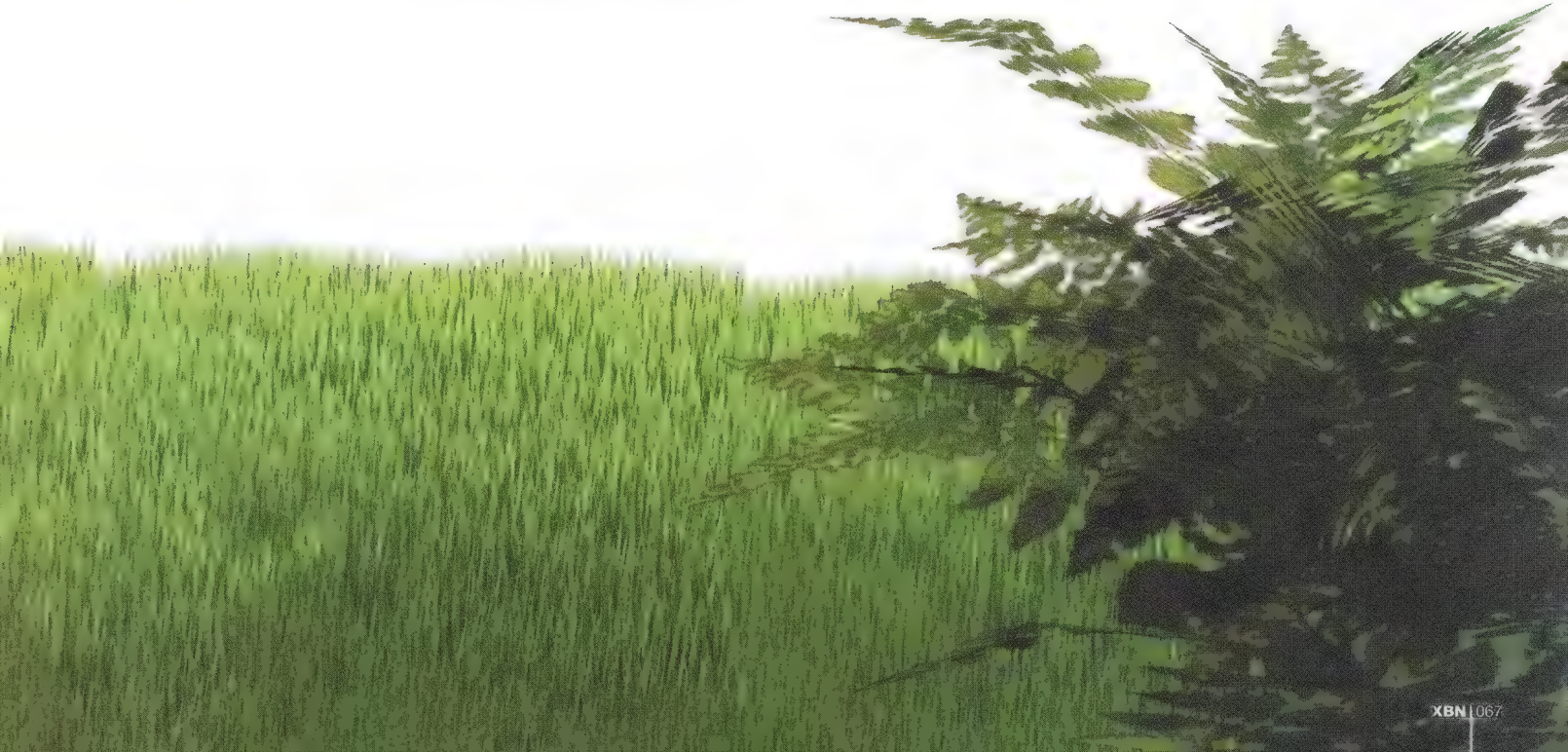
Given developer From Software's presentation and execution here, we'd say this game is very, very murakumo.

Collectively Jonesing

Developer The Collective finds its stride with a Slayer and an archaeologist....

Words: Greg Orlando - Photography: Carlo Bacor

There's a tale to be told here, but more and more it's reading like a mystery. Maybe it's a tale of three men, two of them brothers, who left the safety of their jobs at a videogame conglomerate to form The Collective, an independent developer that found lightning in a license and bottled it. As goofy as it sounds, maybe it's a tale of the company's employees and their creativity and dedication. One of the stains on the company's office carpeting seems chillingly man-sized; is it possible that someone bled and, perhaps, died for his craft, did so on the mottled, light-blue office rug, and no one bothered to hide the fact by applying stain remover? Perhaps the story's about The Collective as a whole, a company known for developing licensed titles, but one that's now seeking to outgrow its past by creating original works such as the fantasy-based strategy game *Wrath*.



Oh, Indiana Jones, when will you ever find love? Here we see Jones doing battle with Giorgio Armani, known for his finely tailored suits, as well as for his powerful left cross. Other screen shots (Right:) show Jones fleeing from Nazis, Mei Ying kicking buttocks, a machine gun minigame, and our hero in the hat enjoying a crisp, icy night in Prague.

And what of The Collective's recreation room (some obscure law must require developers to set aside space where their employees can play foosball and old arcade games), where someone's deposited part of a Jack Daniels liquor bottle wrapper in an unsed corner? What of the strange, scantily clad women multimedia extravaganzas *Malibu Models* and *Cyber Photographer and Print Shop* hidden amid a pile of otherwise quality PC games in said game room? Do alcoholic libations and titillating shovelware fit in somehow? Is it all just a motley collection of red herrings? Could the one, true story of The Collective be read in the face of Indiana Jones, archaeologist and all-around manly man?

The Singer or the Song?

One thing is certain—LucasArts wants all eyes focused on *Indiana Jones and the Emperor's Tomb*, an action adventure coming out for the Xbox, PC, and PlayStation 2 in spring of 2003. The Collective caught LucasArts' eye after creating the surprisingly sharp and smart Xbox beat-em-up *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, and was quickly tapped to develop Indy's newest adventure. It was a perfect fit; *Buffy* and *Emperor's Tomb* feature the same sort of breathless action combined with fisticuffs aplenty. Better still, The Collective could use its powerful Slayer engine, first used in *Buffy*, to make Dr. Jones go.

As *Emperor's Tomb* nears completion, LucasArts' philosophy is, understandably, *it is the tale, and not he who tells it*. Yet when discussing The Collective, it might be more appropriate to note, as did The Who, that it's the singer, not the song, that makes the music move along.

The Singers....

"We come from the old school," Gary Priest, The Collective's vice-president of development says. "You didn't have a lot of graphics in the old days, it was just a couple of pixels on and off, so [a game] had to feel good. The very first thing you focus on is, does it make you empowered as a player? Does it feel intuitive, or do you feel like you're battling with the controls and the camera? If you don't get that right, your game is going to flop immediately."

This philosophy was used to launch the company in 1997, when Priest and brothers Doug and Rich Hare left Virgin Interactive for greener pastures. It has guided The Collective through its early days, when it developed titles such as *Men in Black* and *Life* (a videogame adaptation of the board game) for the PlayStation, and its influence can still be felt today. The company scored a hit with *Star Trek Deep Space 9: The Fallen* for the PC, and found critical, if not commercial, success with its digital rendition of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*. Now, its efforts are divided among *Emperor's Tomb*, the aforementioned *Wrath*, and a secret project that's not yet been revealed.

Surfer chic, and garbed in a green-gray Hawaiian shirt, beige pants, and black sneakers, Priest seems as corporate as cartoon porifera SpongeBob SquarePants. Priest gave The Collective its name, but says neither *Star Trek* nor the cybernetic no-goodniks the Borg (and its collective mind) had anything to do with it. "It was just out of the sense that we wanted to build a development company that was built around a team," he says, "like a unity of collective minds all working together for a common goal, just strength in numbers, that kind of thing. We're all developers as our background; we're not like management people. So we wanted to keep the idea that everybody in the company was all working toward development."

Things are hectic in The Collective's Newport Beach, Calif., offices, what with *Emperor's Tomb* so close to completion. As such, Priest has but 15 minutes or so to spare, and can only shotgun his way through an interview.

When asked to point out what's wrong with the games industry, Priest says, "It's becoming too Hollywood-like. It's churning out too many 'me too' titles. People are jumping on the same bandwagon all the time and there's not enough original content coming out. Publishers are being controlled too much by the marketing side of the business, which has to happen to a certain degree. It just means there's less diversity and there's less to really capture the imagination." Although it seems hard, at least initially, to reconcile this statement with The Collective's history of making licensed games, the evidence at hand shows only a minor incongruity. The Collective, with its last two efforts, has made *good* licensed games.

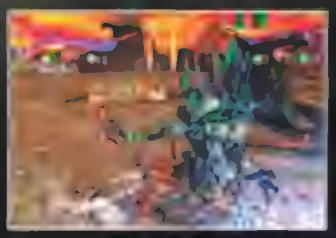
Benjamin Franklin suggested a fish stinks from its head down. From an all-too-brief look, it appears The Collective's leadership exudes not a stench, but rather an emphasis on creative thought, one that can be seen at all levels. Looking at *Emperor's Tomb* in motion, it's clear that a lot of effort was put into making Indiana Jones look great, fight well, and interact with a world that's been carefully plotted out and designed.

Forget gameplay for a moment. Bob Donatucci, senior environmental artist for The Collective and decidedly huge Indiana Jones fan (he has a large Jones figure on his desk, as well as a fedora and real rawhide bullwhip in his car's trunk), knows that he could very well phone it in. The former architect-turned-artist would have to be dumber than tree bark not to know that his work goes largely unnoticed, and that it's a small minority of people that want to hear about the world of environmental design. It doesn't deter him in the slightest, however, and it's clear that he's put a lot of thought into the work he does.

"Environmental art is one of those black arts that nobody speaks of," Donatucci says. "You can save the day with a really good texture. Nice, punchy, high contrast textures; I love that stuff. And the lighting is just ...that's all icing. You sit there and think, 'What's the time of day, what are they trying to do, what kind of feeling do I want to inspire? Is it going to be a dry, warm feeling in this area or do I want to have this cold, icy [world]?' In *Emperor's Tomb*, Istanbul has this kind of dry, hot heat to it, and when you get into the lower levels you get trees and fountains and it's not just a dry place...there's actual salvation. It's a living, breathing environment with a scarred, credible history."

Could the one, **true story of The Collective** be read in the face of Indiana Jones?

Wrath!



Although LucasArts was reluctant to reveal information about The Collective's *Wrath*, *Xbox Nation* was able to piece together a few details on the game, mostly by peeking at its concept art and watching it being animated. The game, which is definitely Xbox-bound, will feature fantastical monsters such as golems, wizards, dragons, and the like pitted in arcade-style battles against one another. The game will play a lot like the PC strategy game *Archon* and Jim Tso, the game's producer, likens it to the battle chess seen in *Star Wars*.

The same passion resonates with Fred Corchero, who's tacking the game's combat scripting. Corchero brings the fighting in *Emperor's Tomb* from design to its finished form, including the acting out of moves. He says, "Every few levels, we wanted to change the style and flow of the combat. In the beginning, you're fighting against guys who fight like Indy, they're using the brawling styles, they're using more roundhouses, just dirty fighting pretty much. When you get a little farther in, when you start getting to the Nazis, they're starting to use more boxing, more dodging, more blocking—getting more of an edge when it comes to defense. When you get past them and deal with the [Asian] Triads, those guys are going to do a lot of dodging. Instead of just man-to-man and head-to-head, you'll actually have flipping around, jumping to the sides, getting out of the way; you pretty much have to run after them. After that we go into the supernatural, and that's where you have to use your mind a little more because you have to use specific weapons."

Tomb looks and plays **like Buffy after months in the gym** and with repeated injections of Anatrofin.

The Song....

With *Emperor's Tomb*, any sort of mystery dissipates. Fueled by the Slayer engine and birthed by creators dead-set on getting it right, *Emperor's Tomb* looks and plays like *Buffy* after a few months in the gym and repeated injections of Anatrofin. In fact, there are genuine concerns that Indiana Jones may be Buffy all over again, this time with a whip and a fedora, albeit on a larger scale.

The game's plot has Dr. Jones beating up Nazis for both fun and profit; traveling to China to do authentic archaeology in the form of plundering the tomb of Ying Zheng, China's first emperor (a real-world site complete with more than 7,000 life-sized terra cotta warriors and horses) to find the fabled Heart of the Dragon; and exploring such exotic locales as Istanbul and Prague. The game will be set in the chaotic year of our lord 1935 and, sadly, will feature neither hide nor hair of Indy's spunky sidekick Short Round. Perhaps to rectify this grievous oversight, *Emperor's Tomb* will include Mei Ying, a brand-new female character who serves as Jones' partner.

There will be minigames to play involving rickshaw and gondola chases, puzzles to solve, and more than 15 weapons, including such beloved classics as bazookas.

shotgune, and machetes; to top it
combat. Indy can also regain health
by drinking water supplied by
fountains, kick his opponents when
they're down, and use his whip to
swing over chasms as well as disarm
and choke foes. (Jim Tso, the game's
producer from LucasArts, offers the
following caveat about the whip: "It's
not a perfect weapon because it has
a sort of minimum range.")

Where's the boulder?

The Collective and LucasArts may have captured Dr. Jones and his mythos perfectly, right down to the sweatstains on his white shirt—save for perhaps one tiny detail. "At one point we did have a giant boulder very much like the boulder in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*," Brad Santos, the game's lead designer says. "But we ended up taking it out of the game. It's amazing how difficult it is to get a giant boulder to move and sound and feel like a real boulder rather than just a big prop."

As a pretty fanciful aside, The Collective's lead artist Brian Horton sports long, dirty blond hair, a beard, and a mustache. This makes him look remarkably like a younger version of the Jesus seen in classical paintings. "What we've done is we got the feel of the boulder chase," he says. Because it's possible to envision him stomping hell in the temple, chasing moneylenders and such, his word will not be questioned. "We have a tank chase sequence. So it sort of takes the place of the giant boulder; you're under this constant time pressure, jumping over chasms, whip-swinging over pits. It has that same kind of feel."

Santos adds, "Basically, the tank is a digging machine, and it's chasing Indy, burrowing through the walls, and the camera is in the point-of-view of the cockpit of the tank which is driven by Von Beck, who's our evil Nazi archaeologist. If you slow down, the tank will crush you. It's a very fast-paced, intense experience."

The End of all Songs....

The book closes on *Indiana Jones and The Emperor's Tomb* when the game sees release in February. Both Tso and The Collective's Producer Rick Watters are confident that *Emperor's Tomb* will be Indy's greatest videogame adventure yet, dismissing the notion that *Indy* will look, feel, and play too much like *Buffy* for gamers' comfort.

The larger story of The Collective and what to make of it remains a mystery, though, and perhaps a badly written and plotted one at that. No amount of prodding will make anyone talk about a blotch on The Collective's carpeting, nor will it make time in the Hare brothers' schedules to be interviewed. *Emperor's Tomb* will add another chapter to the tale, and with luck, it will be revelatory.

As for The Collective's original property, *Wrath*, well, that's a tale—and, hopefully, not a mystery story—for another day.

The Collective's *Indiana Jones and the Emperor's Tomb* team:
1. Fred Corchero 2. Richard Hare 3. Robert Mobbs 4. Nathan Hunt 5. David Nilsen 6. Rick Watters 7. Jim Tso 8. Nick Parde 9. Paul Lee 10. Gary Priest 11. Brad Santos 12. Brian Horton 13. Patrick Cyr 14. Doug Hare, 15. Paul Im 16. Brian Zenns 17. Bob Donatucci 18. Trey Turner.

STEPPING OUT OF THESE PAGES AND INTO YOUR HOMES!

Join Shoe and the rest of the Game Group editors as they invade your screen with the latest game news and releases that will jumpstart your weekend!

Tune in every Thursday 7:45 pm ET/ 4:45 pm PT
to HOT**WIRED**'s Big Video Game Hunting hosted by Renay San Miguel
on CNN Headline News.

BIG VIDEO GAME HUNTING

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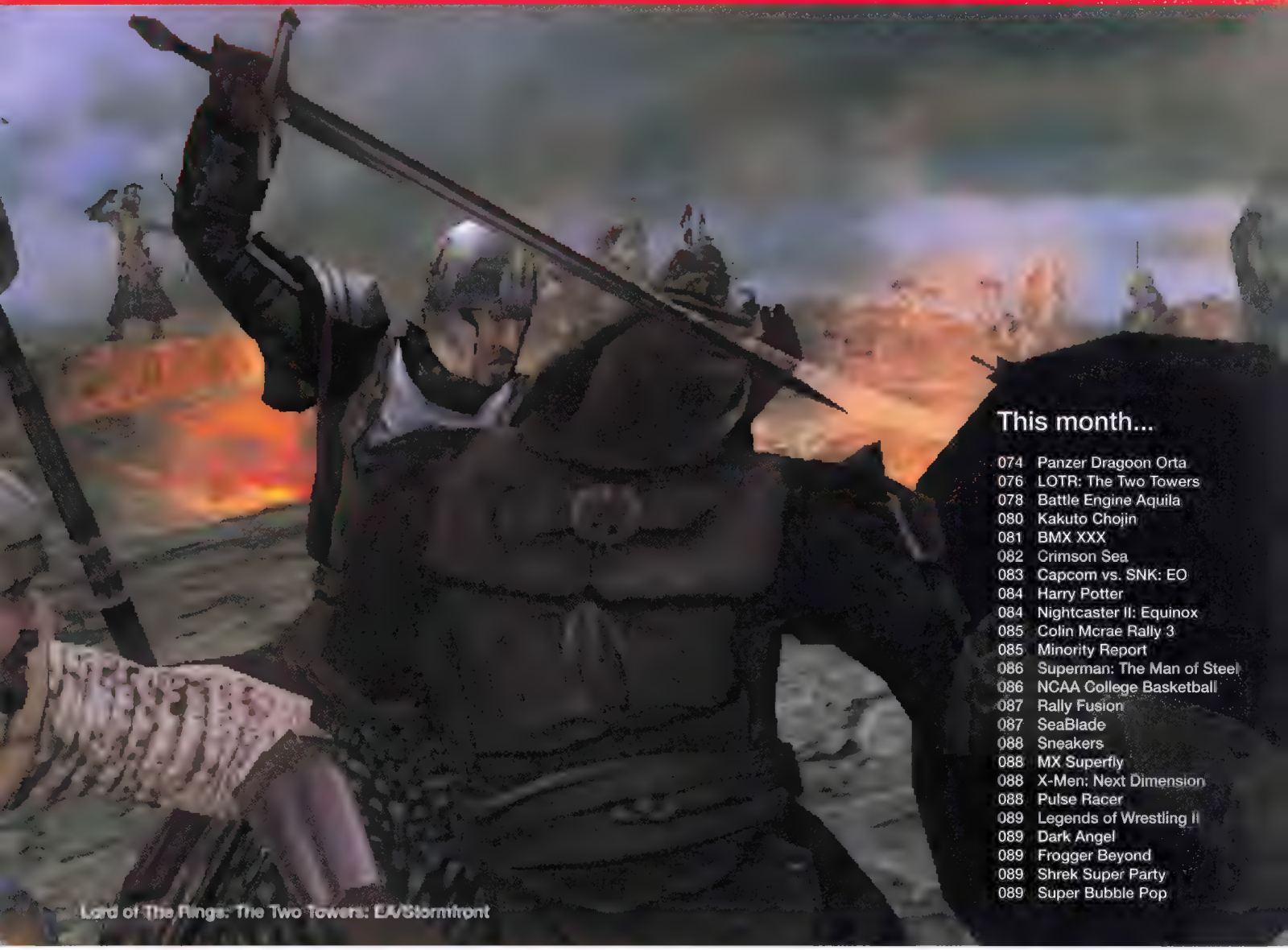

Lord of The Rings: The Two Towers: EA/Stormfront

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089 Dark Angel
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089 Shrek Super Party
089 Super Bubble Pop

How we rate

Being a single-format magazine, *Xbox Nation* finds itself in the difficult situation of critiquing games residing on Xbox, while not blinding ourselves to the sphere of console gaming that surrounds it, either. We will make a point to put each game in context of both its platform and videogames at large, whenever possible.

Our scale is a rigid one-to-10; in an industry where the independent spirit is often kicked maliciously to the curb, and games are often prematurely rushed out the door in the name of quarterly earnings, we believe it's an important time to be critical. And while the burden certainly weighs heavily upon our shoulders as reviewers, it is infinitely heavier on the consumers' backs. In this day of shallow profit margins, wallets speak volumes. Allow us to break it down for the folks in the cheap seats: One is video feces. Two is trash. Three is junk. Four is sub-par. Five is average. Six is slightly above. Seven is very solid. Eight's a real gem. Nine is amazing. Ten is *Halo*.

Our most important requirement is that a game brings something new to the table. And yet, while innovative forms of interaction come first, we don't scoff at technology so cutting edge that it makes our noses bleed, or gameplay that refines a preexisting formula into something so supple it bleeds itself, either. Games that fail to distinguish themselves in one of these crucial ways are—in our opinion—quite easily dismissed, especially at 50 bucks a pop.

REVIEWING THE REVIEWS

A peek into the critiques for *Xbox Nation* #6.

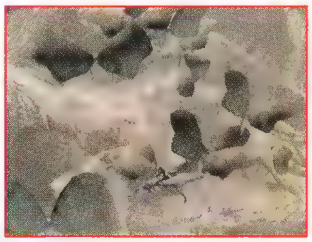
As videogames have made their intrepid leap into nebulous territory—namely, the two unknown quantities of "the third dimension" and "the mainstream"—the stumbling blocks have been many. Merely refining the essential framework upon which the next era of digital stories will be told has been fraught with faulty cameras, untextured polygons, and a general lack of polish we at *Xbox Nation* like to call "supreme jankiness."

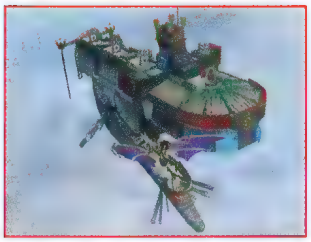
If nothing else, this month's review platter is hard evidence that said framework is firmly in place. The three most notable games to be found in the following pages of Xrated—*Panzer Dragoon Orta*, *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, and *Battle Engine Aquilla*—all succeed because they have effectively translated 2D mechanics into 3D space. They are, respectively, refined versions of *Space Harrier*, *Golden Axe*, and *Herzog Zwei*, effectively matching the level of polish and consistency that these games managed in the infinitely more manageable confines of the second dimension.

The groundwork is there. The standards have been matched. Now it's time for more originality, and not the type pushed by the emphatically unfunny, hooker-fueled nudie romp that is *BMX XXX*.

PANZER DRAGOON ORTA

One last time, and with much enthusiasm: It's a game you *Orta* be playing....





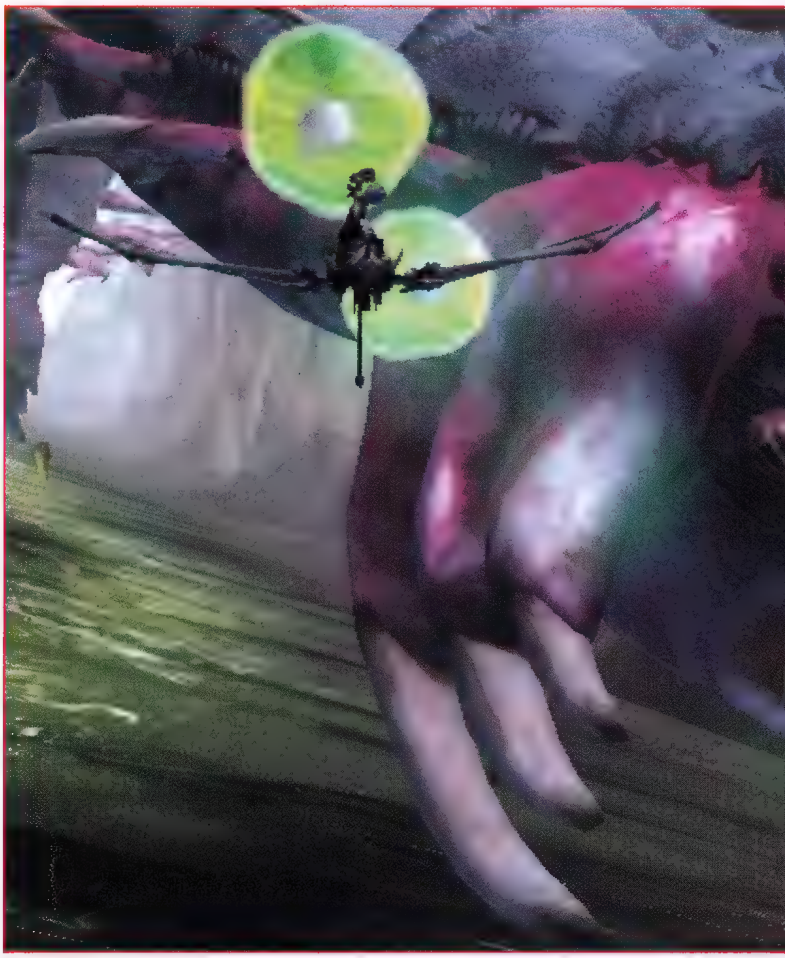
Sometimes, words don't do something justice. Case-in-point: this caption.

The *Panzer Dragoon* series hearkens back to the dawn of 32-bit consoles, to a time when videogames were less about vice and more about nice. It was 1995. Sega was spearheading the debut of its stillborn Saturn system with the awkward realism of *Virtua Fighter* and the gaudy swagger of *Daytona U.S.A.* Amid all the fanboy noise and commercial antihype of Sega's first-party launch titles, one popped from the stack: *Panzer Dragoon*. The game's heady, Moebius-influenced aesthetics and old-school gameplay caught everyone completely off-guard. In one fell stroke, *Panzer* narrowed the gap between art and games.

Fast forward eight years and two sequels later to *Panzer Dragoon Orta*. We're older, wiser, and our consoles are all super-computers. It simply isn't enough to proclaim "this game is a work of art" anymore. Why? Because, frankly, a lot of games look nice these days. Then something like *Orta* comes along and the first thing that comes to mind is, "holy s***, this game *is* a work of art." Developer Smilebit has created a shooter catering to both diehards and newcomers alike, without losing sight of *Panzer*'s key essentials: excellent design, ambience, and story. *Orta* has all the trademarks of the series—and more. Tons more. Set in the same strife-ridden universe as the previous installments, *Orta* takes its name from the game's dragon-riding heroine who must single-handedly dismantle a corrupt empire.

Orta's on-rails, shoot-anything-that-moves gameplay remains mostly unaltered from its previous versions, although Smilebit has added on-the-fly dragon morphing, an element that brings new depth to the proceedings. *Orta*'s ride can burst into three distinct forms (each with its own strengths and weaknesses) at any time, allowing the dragon to constantly adapt to on-screen threats. In fact, later levels almost require toggling between the three dragons just to stay afloat.

Throw in the limited ability to dash around enemy bosses, and the result is a shooter requiring both offensive and defensive strategies. With its relentless pacing and tough boss battles, *Orta* is a serious test of hand-eye motor skills; throughout the 10 gorgeous episodes, you'll put the smack down on a whole bestiary of bosses, from the mini to not-so-mini variety. When you finally defeat that ultimate son-of-a-bitch on your 12th try, you feel as though you've truly earned it.



Puff the Magic Dragon lived by the sea. And he frolicked in the autumn mists in a land called Honnah Lee. Then, oddly, Puff realized he was just a drug reference, and faded into the haze.

Smilebit has created a shooter catering **to both diehards and newcomers alike...**

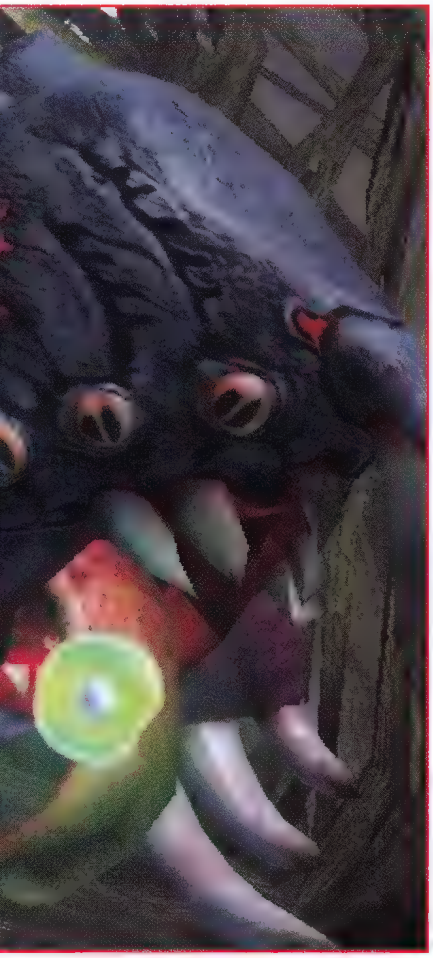
Given the predetermined course of each level, however, *Orta* will still frustrate with its 90 degree camera arcs and narrow margin of maneuverability. To alleviate the feeling that you're stuck on a roller coaster (albeit the most psychedelic roller coaster ever devised), many levels feature several branches to explore, effectively creating an illusion of freedom.

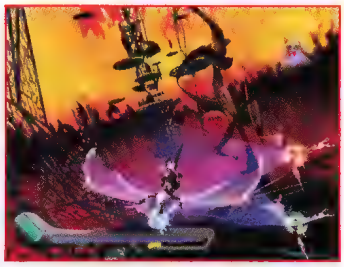
Panzer games have been notoriously short, but *Orta* took more than six hours to beat on our first time through. With Pandora's Box, a collection of unlockable bonus features (including the original Saturn version of *Panzer Dragoon*), would-be dragoons can expect to triple that time exploring extras both in and out of the Box. *Orta* is the most beautiful shooter we've ever played. In fact, it's a work of art.

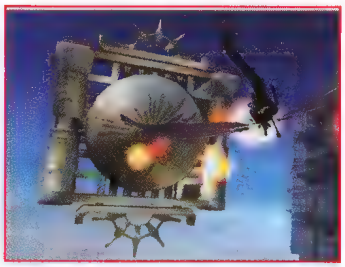
Che Chou

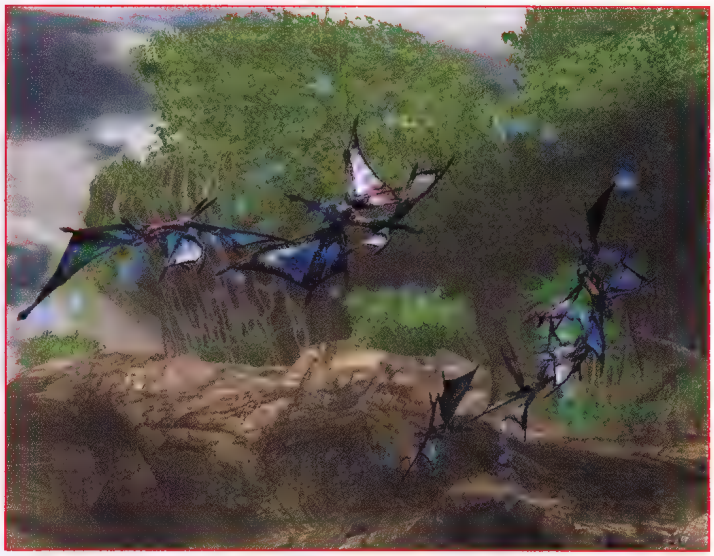
Nine out of Ten

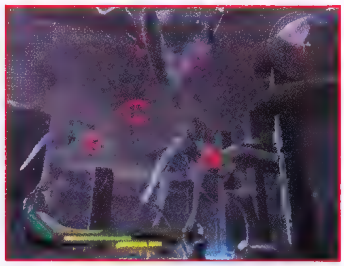
Dev : Smilebit
Pub : Sega
Players : 1
Orta : Be dragoon your butt to the store
Origin : Japan

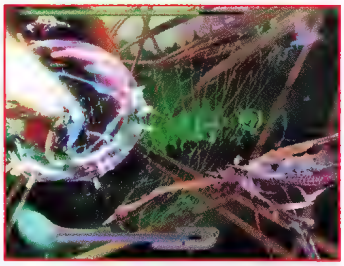










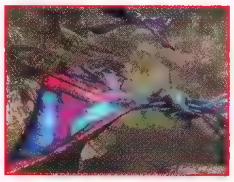


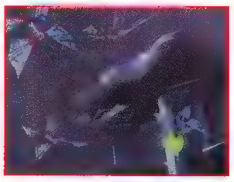
■ *Panzer Dragoon Orta* is, arguably, one the of the most beautiful games ever created. We're already clamoring for moreta. (Get it? Moreta?)

■ Who would have thought a rail shooter could be this fun, or this beautiful? (Answer: Smilebit)

Opening Pandora's Box of goodies

More replay value and extras than you can shake a hidden dragoon at





The Pandora's Box as a mainstay in the *Panzer* series was first introduced in *Panzer Dragoon Zwei*. This veritible box of bonus material encompasses everything from concept art, character sketches, and FMV movies, to hidden levels and characters, bringing a wealth of replay to an already challenging game. *Orta* ups the ante by not only giving you at least eight new sub-quests to conquer, but also the original *Panzer Dragoon* (as seen on Sega Saturn) as well. Yes, the whole game! *Domo arigato*, Smilebit.

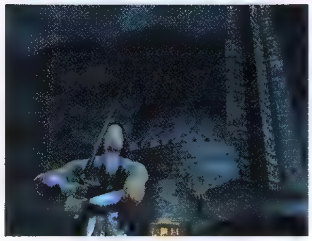
LORD OF THE RINGS: THE TWO TOWERS

When Lucrative Cross-Promotional Opportunities Attack

The dungeon master says, "Thank God you don't have to perform meaningless chores like collecting lillies, as you had to do in that other, craptacular *Lord of the Rings* game."

Legolas the archer does a William Tell on this hapless goblin. Sadly, the apple fell off his target's head, and Legolas had to shoot repeatedly at the groin.

One good-looking game



In terms of visual and aural fidelity, it is not overstating the case to say this is as true to the film(s) that inspired it as any videogame in history. Unbelievably lavish sets, beautiful character renders, and more special effects than the midnight showing of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* makes *Two Towers* a feast for the eyes.

For those who relish the orc-tossing, elf-squeezing, and dragon-baiting sword-n-sorcery that Hollywood has recently thrust back into the public eye, it is high time indeed. EA has aptly cobbled together a side/forward/backward-scrolling slicefest that, though certainly not the deepest formulation of interactive entertainment we've ever stumbled upon, provides an experience that's fun to play, beautiful to watch, and, at times, nothing short of thrillingly immersive.

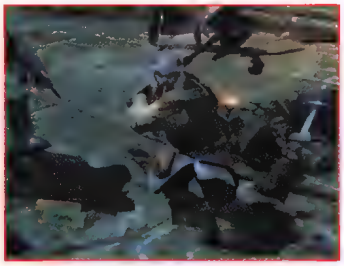
Making considerable use of its lucrative license, *Two Towers* attempts to fuse Peter Jackson's film with the tried-and-tested, *Golden Axe*-style hack-n-slash combat that kept us dropping embarrassing numbers of quarters into arcade machines throughout the '80s and '90s. The structure is, therefore, predictably linear: Watch cut-scene, kill goblins, watch cut-scene, kill ogres. Repeat as necessary. Given the quality of both the cinematic source material and the game's visual stylings, however, the experience is surprisingly cohesive; transitions between the DVD-quality film sequences and EA's finely polished in-game engine are technically brilliant, and sure to elicit a steady flow of ooohs and ahhhhs from those taking trips into J.R.R. Tolkien's (er, Jackson's, er, EA's) fantasy world. (The first of these transitions, which thrusts the player from the introductory cinema directly into the live fray without artifice—or notice—is particularly effective, and will surely become commonplace in this sort of film-to-videogame translation).

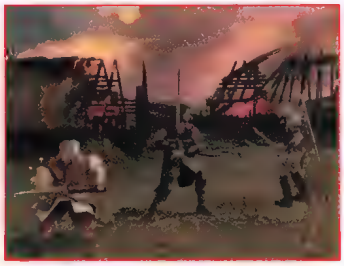
The combat engine is solid. Fighting mechanics, if a bit woolly at times, prove serviceable, marred only by instances of uneven collision detection and awkward transitions between animations. The combo system is impressively deep and, combined with a proficient reward system (the better you perform in combat, the more points you're given toward upgrading your character with better moves, weapons, and items), manages to keep the intrinsically repetitive combat from becoming too stale, too quickly. (It does seem, however, that the Tolkien universe, itself so rich in character and narrative, could have been translated into a game with a bit more depth.)

Everything in *Two Towers*—from the rich, lush environments to the lovingly rendered boss monsters—comes impressively close to matching its cinematic counterpart, and taken together, provides most of the impetus for continuing to charge forward. The game has been honed to a ruddy, magical glow. From the blast of a crumbling boulder's thousand bits hurtling toward the camera, to the dancing flame of Aragorn's torch, to the howl of a thousand winds alongside Howard Shore's Academy Award-

The structure is predictably linear: **Watch cut-scene, kill goblins, watch cut-scene, kill ogres.**

Dev : EA / Stormfront
Pub : EA
Players : 1
Towering : Achievement
Origin : San Rafel, CA





■ Aragorn the ranger kills a monster while Legolas looks on. As is becoming standard fare for high-profile EA releases, the production values are extremely high; lighting and weather effects will amaze.

winning musical score, the fabrication of the game's content is singularly visceral, instinctive, and immediate.

And it's precisely this sort of attention to detail that sets *Two Towers* apart and, dare we say it, elevates the game to must-play status. It seems EA's deep pockets—along with the license's guaranteed financial returns—resulted in the game's undeniably impressive production values, and, significantly, a superbly immersive experience because of it. Even for those of us not particularly awed by the film, the game provides a dazzling ride...all the way through Middle-Earth, or as long as your blistered and war-worn thumbs will allow.

Evan Shamoon

Eight out of Ten

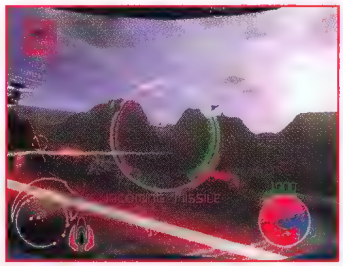
Double dribble

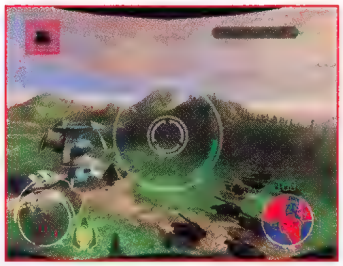
While EA's *Two Towers* is indeed several billion times better than the Universal game, we would be remiss if we did not mention its most glaring ommission: a cooperative mode. While we understand the difficulty of incorporating this into the 3D realm, hacking and slashing to this degree proves infinitely better with company.

BATTLE ENGINE AQUILA

We don't know what a *Battle Engine Aquila* is, but we know we've never seen it before

See it, shoot it. *Battle Engine Aquila* keeps things simple, but there is some strategy to the game. What do you attack first? Well? We're waiting!





Go forth, ye Battle Engines, and blow up much stuff and/or things.

ProTip: Dropships are about to land near your buildings in the south.

Collateral Damage

What good is a giant mech of war if you can't use it to blow stuff up real good? It's useless. Realizing this, developer Lost Toys made damn sure your Battle Engine has the firepower to dismantle any structure in *Aquila* on a detailed, piece-by-piece basis. Haven't you heard? Destruction is cool.

War. What is it good for? Well, good God man, it's great for videogames—especially one rendering it on such a massive scale as *Battle Engine Aquila*. There's been relatively little hype surrounding this admittedly odd-looking shooter, and probably for good reason. Feel the pain of Infogrames' marketing execs as they grapple with such queries as: What the hell is a Battle Engine? And who the hell is this Aquila character? Good questions, to be sure, but ones you'll quickly forget once you see the game in motion. No, for *Aquila*, the war for market share may be fought in the glitzy theater of advertising, but it'll be won on the gameplay front.

Set in the far-flung future where military engineers prefer form over function, *Aquila* tells the tale of um, well, there isn't really a storyline. What the gawky in-between mission cutscenes do convey is that there's this evil Red army that's out to destroy the righteous Blue army. The Red army is evil because its commander sports a hideous scar and sounds like Satan, while the Blue army is led by a creepy Colin Powell-inspired general who calls you "son" every chance he gets.

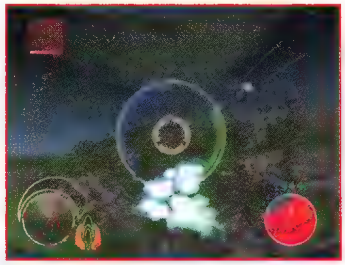
Thankfully, little of this silliness pervades the actual game once you're in the thick of combat, soaring and overlooking islands populated by hundreds of units locked in battle. As the pilot of a prototype Battle Engine, a transformable crab-like mech-cum-jet fighter (to use the term loosely), you're geared-out with an arsenal worthy of deeming you a one-man army. Except...you're not. Playing an important role in every battle are hundreds of friendly grunts, tanks, artillery, and a smattering of air support, all working together for a decisive victory.

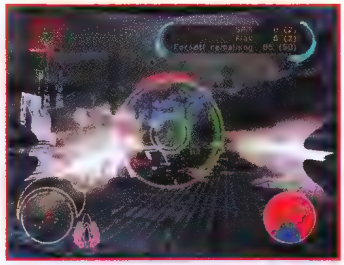
What really impresses about *Aquila* is the dynamic manner in which every skirmish unfolds. While you don't tell your troops where to go and what to attack (they already know they're supposed to kill Reds), there's still a lot of strategy involved. If you see a battalion of enemy tanks roll through the valley and into your base, sometimes it's better to nip the attack in the bud and shower some micromissiles onto the factory producing said Red armor units. You're the ultimate offensive and defensive weapon, dropping into hot zones and giving fire support or taking out specific targets doing the most damage to your army.

What's amazing is that if you want to, you can kick back in your air-conditioned Battle Engine with a cup of coffee and just watch the battle go down with your zoom lens. That's when you realize just how much action is going on around you, independently. It may, or may not, be possible to win

Aquila is a nice balance of action and strategy, as well as a **remarkable technical achievement ...**

Dev : Lost Toys
Pub : Infogrames
Players : 1-2
Powerful: Engine
Origin: U.K.





■ Were we lesser men, we would make some sort of lowbrow response to the narrator's commentary, something in the vein of, "That's what she said!" Thankfully, we are not so vulgar.

a mission doing just that; given the circumstances, anything is possible in this game. Still, with *Aquila*'s easy-to-pick up controls (modeled after popular first-person shooters), sitting out a battle is anything but an alternative.

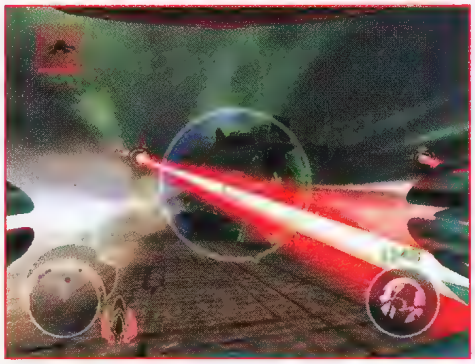
Sure, the game could use some lessons on style and narrative, but, *Panzer Dragoon* aside, when was the last time you turned down a good shooter for its lack of storyline? Despite its somewhat soulless western-gaming aesthetics, *Aquila* is a nice balance of action and strategy, as well as a remarkable technical achievement. Like John Lennon and Yoko Ono once said, "War is over! If you want it." The real question is, do you want it badly enough?

Che Chou

Seven out of Ten

My Battle Engine can kick your Battle Engine's ass

Twin engines—higher torque, more power, no horses



Aquila's epic, army-sized battles and tactics-lite gameplay lend themselves perfectly to multiplayer battles. Depending on the mood of the day, you and a friend can choose to play in Co-op, Skirmish or Deathmatch mode. In Co-op, both players wage war against the computer via splitscreen by beating specially tuned levels balanced for the might of two Battle Engines. While that's all good and fun, what, uh, really revs our engines are the skirmish games pitting playable armies against each other. "Although the player's only interface is through his guns, he's able to affect the course of the entire battle by strategically taking out specific targets or protecting his own units," Darran Thomas, director and co-founder of developer Lost Toys says. Finally, two-player Deathmatch mode is a good example of what happens when Battle Engines attack...each other. Our only gripe with *Aquila* is the game's lack of any system link or online support. *Aquila 2*, where are you?

KAKUTO CHOJIN

Kakuto Chojin: Japanese for "crappy fighting game"

Dev : Dream Factory
Pub : Microsoft
Players : 1-4
Chojin : Poorly
Origin : Japan

All of the characters in *Kakuto Chojin* are rather plastic looking, and the videogame they inhabit is greatly lacking in the following four categories: soul, constiency, sense of rhythym, and also goodness.

It's a bit distressing when, six months before a title is set for release, its publisher notifies you that specific information regarding gameplay is "unavailable at this time." Such was the case with *Kakuto Chojin* when *Xbox Nation* attempted to preview the game for its second issue.

Perhaps the most extraordinary thing about Microsoft's latest brawler is that it seems to have been developed inside a vacuum, all but blind to the genre that surrounds it. With mechanics circa 1995 and fewer bells and whistles than Ash Wednesday at the nunnery, developer Dream Factory has managed to design a 3D fighting game with, quite literally, zero innovations. Realistic physics? Interactive environments? Layered fighting systems? Check "D" for "None of the Above."

Moves are painfully simplistic, generally requiring nothing more than repeated button combinations along with the occasional directional hold; those weaned on the *Street Fighters* and *Soul Caliburs* of the world will undoubtedly find themselves mystified by the game's sheer lack of rhythm or consistency. The fact that legendary fighter *Tobal 2* graces Dream Factory's résumé makes this one even more difficult to comprehend; one can only wonder what transgressions occurred between the game's conception and release to elicit such vitriol.

At the decidedly hazardous risk of beating a dead horse back to life, it should also be mentioned that *Kakuto Chojin* is as aesthetically bereft as any game in recent memory. Gaudy, ineffective use of light and sound—along with characters whose names (JD Stone, Crusher Ramirez) speak volumes about how uninspired they actually are—result in something as painful to watch as it is to play. Even *Chojin*'s technical endeavors come off as misguided and uneven, with character models looking oddly plastic and backgrounds flatter than disco's EKG. We would complain about the inability to customize our in-game soundtrack, but the point is relatively moot considering the lengthy list of digital atrocities preceding it.

The release of *Kakuto Chojin* makes us wonder whether or not anyone at Microsoft is actually paying attention. Unleashing this hodgepodge of unfinished, hackneyed concepts in its current form as a high-profile, first-party title is itself more destructive than Microsoft seems willing to admit. Taken on its own, the game is a mess; placed next to first-party releases from Sony and Nintendo, it's nothing short of a travesty. If the Redmond-based giant truly believes in the art videogames, it's going to take a great deal more than *Kakuto Chojin* to prove it.

Evan Shamoon

We've asked it before, and we've asked it again: Why must every woman in every fighting game be dressed like a hooker? Wouldn't it be more advantagous to wear comfortable clothing during a fight?

Dream Factory has managed to design a 3D fighting game with, quite literally, **zero innovations**

Menage a blah

Kakuto Chojin's four-player mode, described by senior editor Che Chou as "janky," "ill-conceived," "unfun," and, lastly, "horrible," is essentially the equivalent of a Yugo with a top-of-the-line 100-disc CD changer and 5.1 surround sound speaker setup. That is, it's useless.

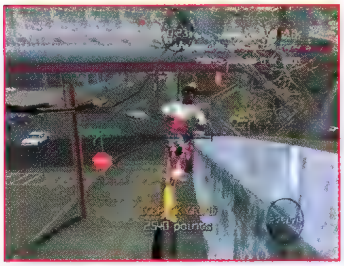
After pulling a groin muscle in the midst of his dance-off with legendary mamba king Uter Johansen, Phil returned to his previous career of starring in B-rate Xbox videogames. (Note: "B" means "F.")

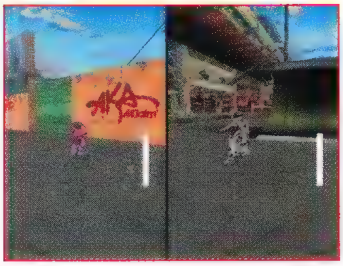
Three out of Ten

BMX XXX

Or: Badly drawn ladies saying "s*@t" and riding bikes....

Dev : Z-Axis
Pub : Acclaim
Players : 1-2
XXX : Suxxx
Origin : Hell





■ Create your own skater, dress her like a pre-adolescent schoolgirl hooker, and ride around Craptown on your new bike. Whoopedydoo!

A BMX game built from the weatherbeaten *Dave Mirra* engine, *XXX* offers raunchiness and cursing, strippers and whores. Any claim to its maturity, however, even considering its content, may be easily dismissed. *XXX*'s sophomoric humor (we've played funnier games of chess, and watched more comedic documentaries on leprosy) relies on weak sexual innuendo, excretory functions, and, of course, the seven words you absolutely can't say on television. Here's some of the stuff you will not laugh at: dogs fornicating, bird poop, aliens anally impaled on a probe, a fireman who can't get it up (his hose, that is), a Winona Ryder-styled shoplifter, a religious zealot named Horndaug, and the space station deliciously named Launch Pad 69. There's nudity, too, but even *XXX*'s creators won't deny this is anything but a gimmick.

Past its pathetic attempt to stand out, *XXX* emerges as a competent, if somewhat slapdash, extreme-sports title. All *Dave Mirra*'s bumps and rough edges have made their way into *XXX*, especially in terms of the Grinds. Players can ride rails for an eternity thanks to an incredibly forgiving balance system; even tilted 30 degrees or so, a character will be able to slide and glide on his merry way. Botched tricks can usually be salvaged by pressing the Grind button, which allows even the most disoriented rider on the most askew bike to balance on a ledge and gain points.

■ Collect points and then drop off this pink poodle near another dog. You'll get a cut-scene of the dogs humping, which would be funny if you hadn't already graduated from fourth grade.

Here's some of the stuff you will not laugh at: **dogs fornicating, bird poop, aliens anally impaled...**

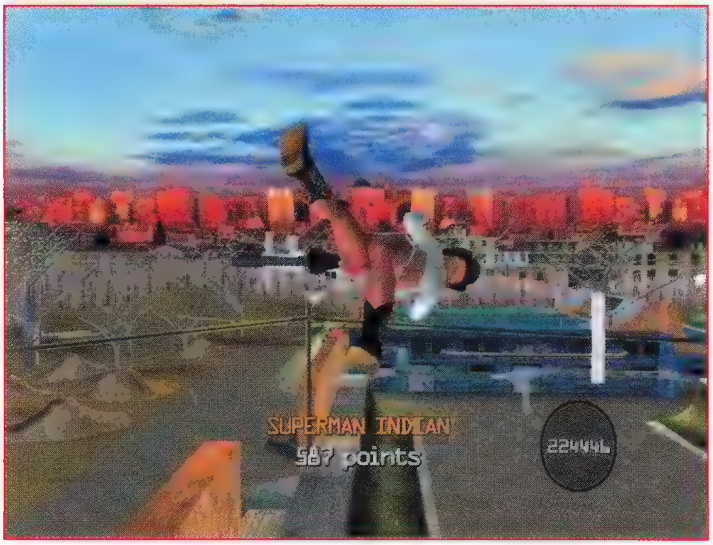
Acclaim's SIK trick system allows for great creativity. Most maneuvers can be modified by pressing the B button and a direction on the D-pad or left analog stick. This freedom comes at a price; players will quickly note the game's camera is not so ingenious. It hangs on obstacles with enough frequency to be obtrusive, and spins wildly until the rider moves away from the offending piece of terrain.

Mission-based challenges allow players to unlock movies of strippers prancing in the buff, and it's sad to note the videos are more competently produced than the game itself. In-game goals are often poorly explained; Many, many people know "fruitbooter" is a slur for inline skaters, but *XXX* expects, without exception, that everyone is hip to the lingo. As the game progresses to a mall, Las Vegas, a dam, and a launch pad, the missions digress to a "same-crap, different stage," kind of mishmash. Expect lots of point- and item-collection tasks, escort missions, and property destruction challenges, all done to the melodious tune of rockin' rock music and poorly skilled voice actors abusing the English language.

Greg Orlando

Booby LeFemme

To celebrate the arrival of *BMX XXX*, we created our own biker, dressed her in the fine style of a schoolgirl hooker, and named her Booby LeFemme. Booby, a thinly dressed matron of the two-wheeled arts, performed admirably among the pimps, strippers, foul-mouthed clowns, and other denizens of this adults-only opus.



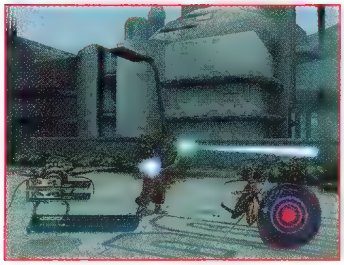
■ Play the game to unlock 30-second movies of strippers? Why bother? Use these codes instead: XXX RATED CHEAT and CHAMPAGNE ROOM.

Four out of Ten

CRIMSON SEA

Koei parts the Red Sea

Dev : Koei
Pub : Koei
Players : 1
Delicious : Sea Food
Origin : Japan

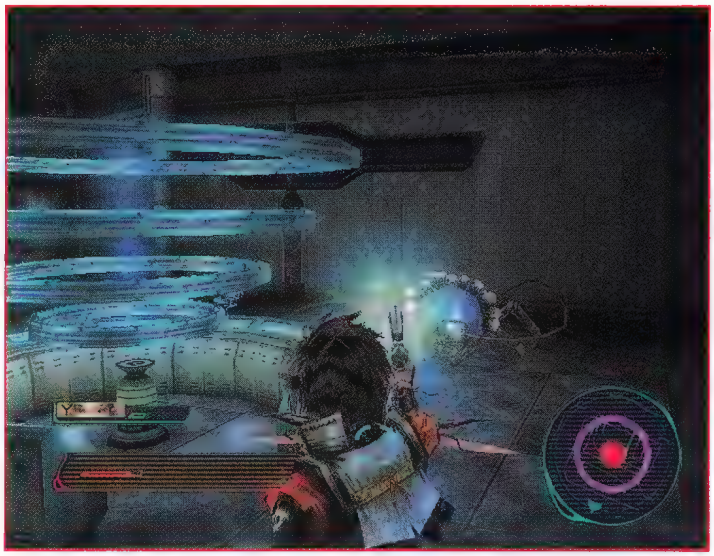


Sho's Neo-Psionic powers grow as the game progresses, and can be used to wipe out onscreen enemies or heal our hero.

"Trust me," the mysterious and sexy woman Live-D tells young hero Sho. "It's just that I'm a mysterious and sexy woman with a slightly lawless aura." And with this bit of high comedy begins the epic 3D, third-person adventure *Crimson Sea*.

Strange things are afoot in the Empire of Theopilus. A mysterious, but not sexy, group of Muton aliens are wreaking havoc. The mysterious and sexy Live-D enlists Sho, a brawler who's much more than he seems, to battle the aliens. Sho and his cohorts form a warrior band that's neither mysterious nor sexy and, together, this squad must find answers to the mystery of the Muton aliens' appearance while simultaneously blasting and chopping its way to victory.

Beautiful and challenging, the futuristic *Crimson Sea* throws hundreds of creepy Muton beasts (which take the form of blobs, insects, gruesome monsters, monkey-like things, etc.) on screen at the same time. Sho can tear into them with an energy blade or cut them down with an assortment of powerful and customizable guns. Although *Sea* is, at heart, an action-shooter-cum-blast-em-up, the missions are all quite varied, and this, frankly, is a godsend. At one point, Sho must stave off wave after wave of Mutons while his androgynous sidekick Yangqin repairs a ship. Later, he must rescue a lazy presidential type, running behind the geezer to physically push him into action. Still another cool challenge has Sho racing across a series of rapidly moving walkways attempting to collect musical notes while simultaneously trying to fend off the Mutons. Even the missions requiring Sho to storm in and kill a endless horde of Muton aliens are remarkably well done. These stages, with their unceasing tide of enemies, are thrilling; there's literally no caesura until every alien has been slaughtered and the stage ends. Once completed, there's a tremendous sense of accomplishment at having killed them all and allowed God to sort out any resultant cleaning bill.



Sho can customize his guns for rapid fire and really big, bomb-like blasts. He can also fight with melee weapons for that up close and personal touch.

Beautiful and challenging, *Crimson Sea* throws hundreds of beasts onscreen at one time....

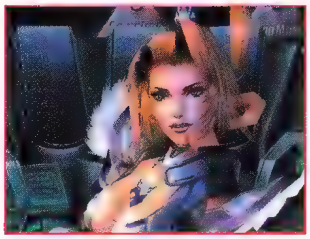
Simple and elegant, *Sea*'s only notable flaws are with its somewhat jerky control system that makes battles more difficult than they ought to be. The game also has the unfortunate tendency to mask its beautiful graphics in overly dark environments.

But this is all minor chop on a beautiful (if undeniably repetitive) *Sea*.The battles are frenetic and, ultimately, cathartic; they improve significantly upon the madness Koei established in the *Dynasty Warrior* series. A twisting, turning plot tops off the meal and this *Sea*, simply, demands to be bathed in.

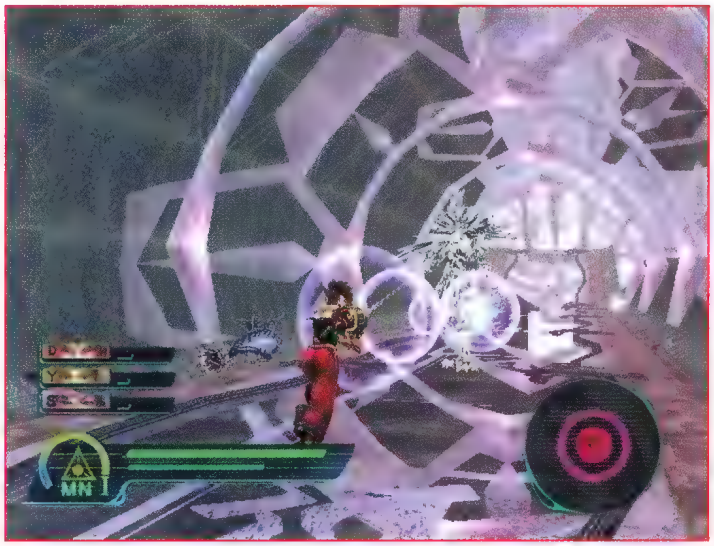
Greg Orlando

Eight out of Ten

Live-D



This is Live-D. a mysterious and sexy woman who introduces herself as, "A mysterious and sexy woman with a slightly lawless aura." Ms. D enlists the hero Sho to battle Muton aliens by offering him lots of cash and also many, many opportunities to stare at her mysterious and sexy cleavage. Such is her mystery and sex appeal.

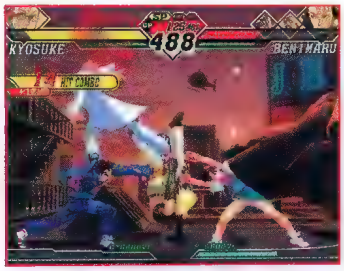


Sho can escort his squad into hostile territory and utilize special psychic powers to kill all manner of creepily designed aliens. Here he fights glass monsters with his wonderful Windex gun.

CAPCOM VS. SNK: EO

Take the fight online....

Dev : Capcom
Pub : Capcom
Players : 1-2
SNK : or SWIM
Origin : Japan



Geese, angry at having been cast out of A Flock of Seagulls, takes his anger out on Street Fighter Ken. Get it? Geese? Seagulls?

The melding of Capcom and SNK's separate and distinct fighting game universes, the videogame equivalent of Spider-Man teaming up with Batman, shook the firmament. Players could now pit Guile, Ken, and Ryu against Ryo, Geese, and Mai to see which game company had the best brawlers. And now, as *Capcom vs. SNK: EO* comes to Xbox with online play through Xbox Live, well, we expect that heaven, or a reasonable facsimile, has made its way to Earth. Truly, all is well for those craving videogame conflict, but who are too lazy to put on pants, leave the house, and go searching for an arcade.

For those who lost track of who's who in the world of Capcom brawlers, *EO* takes the company's most treasured characters and pits them fist-to-mouth against pugilists from the now-defunct SNK, most famous for its cult-favorite *King of Fighters* series. The result, as you can imagine, is a wild collage of martial styles, character designs, and imaginative anachronisms. Those of you hoping the added EO would bring a secret cameo by Michael "Nose Rot" Jackson himself will be sorely disappointed, as the added subtitle simply stands for "easy operation," a novice control scheme allowing you to dish out special attacks with the slightest push of the right analog stick.

In single-player, *EO* deviates little from past 2D fighting games in its play, except that this time, offline play serves as practice for the real thing on Xbox Live. Once you do hop online, *EO* presents you with flexible customization options, including the ability to create your own costume colors, search for friends, issue a challenge for a match based on your criteria (arcade or EO rules), or simply check rankings to see where you stand nationally. The whole interface is straightforward and well-executed, if a bit spartan.

Ken proves it's fun to beat up on a fat man wearing a ball-and-chain, while a midget Freddy Krueger looks on.

Sadly, performance was spotty thanks to ever-depressing and intermittent network lag...

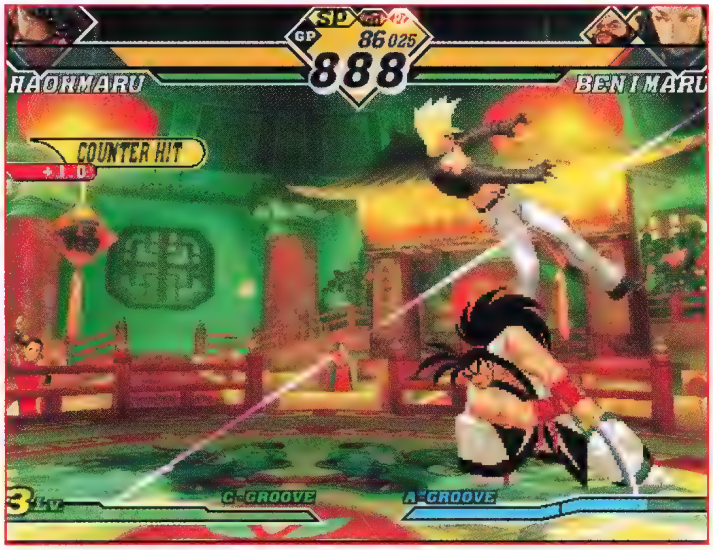
Of course, the real test here is how the game plays out online. Sadly, performance is spotty thanks to ever-depressing and intermittent network lag, which serves as an absolute buzzkill. Thankfully, the game rates and displays the connection quality of your opponent before you enter a match, so at least you know what to expect. It's entirely possible these latency issues have more to do with Xbox Live's beta-test network (which isn't hosted on the same servers as final retail accounts), and less to do with *EO*'s network ineptitude; if this is the case, then this is indeed one of the best Live games out there. But if, by the time you read this, the game still suffers from slowdown, then it's a failure in our book and you can knock two points off our score.

Che Chou

Eight out of Ten

EO Controls

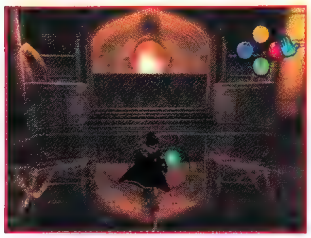
Capcom vs. SNK 2 levels the online playing field by introducing the EO (easy operation) control scheme. Forget all those complicated quarter-circle moves, with EO controls, all you need is a pulse and a thumb to push the right analog stick in any direction for special attacks. Pretty handy...for a total scrub, that is.



The great debate between "tastes great" and "less filling" became violent and, when the smoke cleared, young Benimaru was sliced into tender cutlets and sold as Cannibal Chow.

HARRY POTTER AND THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS

Dev : Eurocom / EA UK
Pub : EA Games
Players : 1-2
Hell is for : Children
Orgin: Surrey, U.K.



Visually, *Chamber* faithfully recreates the film's somewhat garish art direction, painting Hogwarts Castle as a colorful, bizarre funhouse to be explored. The sound is similarly good, even though the movie's score and actors aren't used.

When the first Harry Potter synergistic mass-marketing juggernaut hit (along with the release of the first movie, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*), EA wasn't fully prepared to cash in on the gaming tie-in potential. No next-gen Potter materialized, merely PlayStation and Game Boy games. This time, the J.K. Rowling empire has its act together; this *Zelda*-inspired romp cuts a cross-platform swath across the sales charts, brightening the holiday spirits of junior necromancers across the globe.

And, for a change, this isn't just licensed crap: *Chamber* offers a solid, enjoyable adventure that wears its heavy *Zelda* inspiration with pride. You'll explore dank catacombs, amass magic items, cast dazzling spells, and battle bosses just like Nintendo's favorite elf. Narratively, you won't be able to fully grasp the complex plot unless you've read the book or seen the film, but most people who pick this up won't be saying, "Harry who? This looks intriguing!" The action closely follows the day-to-day life of young Potter, turning daily classwork into enjoyable platform stages and allowing free exploration late at night. Also, a fun dueling system makes for some tense boss fights, and the airborne sport of Quidditch is well represented as a frenzied, impressive minigame.

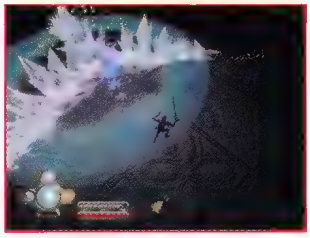
Unlike Link's adventures, however, Harry's quest ends quickly. EA would likely have been forced to add to the book in order to fill it out, so what's here is somehow a bit unfulfilling. Despite little replay value, *Chambers* nonetheless provides a gratifying ride.

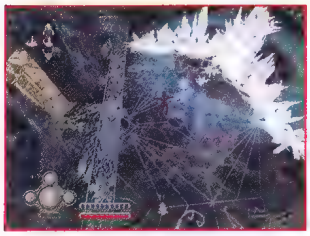
Shane Bettenhausen

Seven out of Ten

NIGHTCASTER II: EQUINOX

Dev : Jaleco
Pub : Jaleco
Players : 1
Still : Nightcaster
Origin : U.S.A.



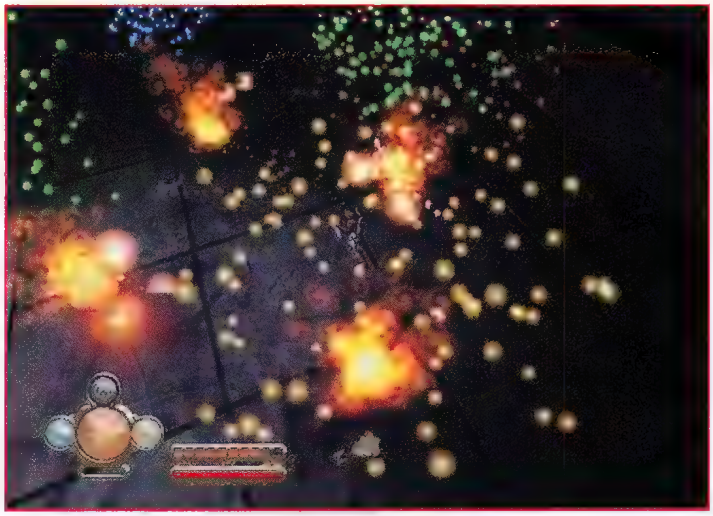


Nightcaster II: Equinox outdoes its predecessor *Nightcaster: Defeat The Darkness*. This, however, is not saying much.

When Microsoft threw *Nightcaster: Defeat the Darkness* to the gaming wolves back during the Xbox's formative months, consumers and critics alike ripped the game a new black hole. Underneath its ambitious RPG posturing, *Nightcaster* was nothing more than a glorified shoot-em-up based on the old *Smash TV* move-with-one-joystick-and-shoot-with-the-other mechanic.

So when *Nightcaster II: Equinox* appeared at *Xbox Nation* with a new publisher and nary a word of warning, our shovelware senses tingled. Thankfully, some of our paranoia was unfounded; its creators have gone back to the drawing board to produce a game that's marginally better than the last. Ironically, it took the equivalent of getting dropped by a major label and signing to an indie for the game to get the focus it never had.

By combining spell-based arcade action with slight exploration and minor character development, the sequel picks up where *Nightcaster* left off. Except this time, melee combos and a new, two-player Co-op mode gives the game a more *Gauntlet* hack-n-slash vibe. Like before, each of the 32 spells dish out pain with an imaginative, visual twist. Plus, the game has all but ditched its 3D- adventure pretensions by concentrating on creating levels that are more linear and less frustrating.



Many of the same pitfalls that plague the first *Nightcaster*—uninspired characters, repetitive gameplay, and a terrible user interface—still reside here. If you're in the mood for something mediocre, well, this is your ticket to ride.

Che Chou

Five out of Ten

COLIN MCRAE RALLY 3

Dev : Codemasters
Pub : Codemasters
Players : 1-2
Colin : All Cars!
Origin : U.K.

Colin Mcrae makes millions of dollars a year driving a heavily souped-up Ford Focus. If only there were a Chevette team...

RalliSport Challenge delivered great arcade rally thrills, but *Colin Mcrae 3* is the real deal. In this, the first of the series on Xbox, Codemasters delivers a triumph of a rally game.

As in real rally racing, races take place over multiple days, with multiple stages per day. You don't race against other cars directly. Instead, you race against the clock to earn the best time over the entire rally. Car damage can be repaired, but only at the end of the day—mess up the handling on the first stage and be prepared to fight the car for the next few segments. The damage modeling deserves special mention; just about every piece of the car can fly off, dent, or get otherwise beaten upon. It may be the best damage modeling we've ever seen; the only thing missing from real rally racing is the amusing sight of drivers kicking out their damaged windshields.

The realism comes at a price, however. There are far fewer licensed cars, tracks, and racing modes compared to *RalliSport*, and the realism, while not as intense as an F1 sim, may be daunting for some.

Is *Colin Mcrae* for you? Even if you've never been into rally racing, if you're looking for a flawlessly executed version of one of the coolest motor sports on earth, this is well worth checking out. And if you're already a rally fan, well, you probably didn't need this review to convince you to get the game. Codemasters is known as *the* company for racing games in Europe, and it's easy to see why. It doesn't get much better than this.

Hiroki Yamaguchi

Eight out of Ten

MINORITY REPORT

Dev : Treyarch
Pub : Activisioin
Players : 1
Minor : League
Origin : Los Angeles, CA

Notice that while the game's hero looks nothing like Tom Cruise, he is the exact same height as Cruise....

Movieplex action blockbusters like *Minority Report* are perhaps the most obvious game fodder, what with all the hover copters and exploding robots and other blow-uppey goodness. You'd think a developer could take all the best elements from the film and plug in a few med packs and a Big Head mode for a sure-fire hit. But instead, *Minority Report* joins the ranks of rushed movie-to-game conversions, with drab visuals, repetitive gameplay, and a lack of style.

The game's plot follows the movie closely, tracing the near-future adventures of a cop accused of a crime he will supposedly commit, as predicted by a trio of psychic precogs. Most of the movie's environments and characters are included, although the finer details have been stripped; apparently, the future will be a very gray place, filled with empty shopping malls, office buildings, and sewers.

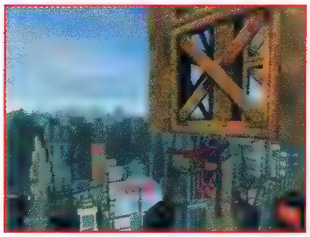
Level after level, the player punches, kicks, and shoots through waves of similar-looking futuristic soldiers, robots, and spider sentries. The brawling engine is good looking, but shallow. There are plenty of combos to choose from, and hurled enemies often smash like rag dolls into windows and furniture, causing some cool cinematic moments. But there's little motivation for a player to choose one combo over another, leading to maddeningly repetitious gameplay. Even the jetpack-piloting levels fail to spice up the proceedings. With quite a few solid action games on the market these days, *Minority Report* doesn't stack up.

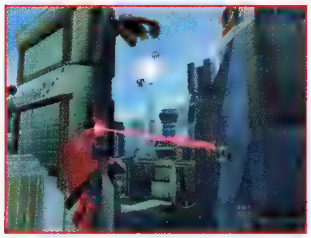
Adam Gake

Five out of Ten

SUPERMAN: THE MAN OF STEEL

Dev : Circus Freak
Pub : Atari/Infogrames
Players : 1
Super : Turkey
Origin : U.S.A.





Who would dare to supercede Superman? Super, Super, Superwho? (With apologies to John Updike.)

While we at *Xbox Nation* greatly respect our competitors at *Official Xbox Magazine*, we would, in the spirit of good-natured ribbing, like to ask what variety of crack they were smoking when they wrote *Superman: The Man of Steel* was "The Greatest Superhero Game Ever Made." If this is the greatest superhero game ever made anywhere other than on the Planet Bizarro (where bad is good and videogames play you), then the videogame industry has forgotten the handbasket and leapt straight into hell's fiery abyss.

Yes, all of Superman's powers are faithfully created here, and the graphics are decent. Where the game fails, and fails miserably, is with its choice of enemies and challenges. Remember that Superman, if he wished, could probably give God a wedgie; he needs to be pitted against powerful foes and presented with obstacles worthy of a Man of Steel. Instead, we get lame robots, and lots of them. The challenges here are not worthy of a Man of Tissue Paper, let alone a Man of Steel, but nonetheless have to be completed within a severe time limit or it's game over.

Long after you've begun to wonder where the Metropolis Fire Department is, Superman will be required to zip around like a superidiot, extinguishing blazes with his freeze breath. And because firefighting works well once, it's repeated *ad nauseam* throughout the Metropolis stages. These missions sap *Man of Steel* of all its vitality, rendering it about as far as from the greatest superhero game ever made as, say, *Grand Theft Auto III* and *Sega GT*.

Greg Orlando

Four out of Ten

NCAA COLLEGE BASKETBALL 2K3

Dev : Visual Concepts
Pub : Sega Sports
Players : 1-4
NCAA : AOKAY
Origin : San Rafael, CA

Online play is, as with *NBA 2K3*, remarkably smooth. Sadly, Legacy mode is not an online option. Until next year, then....

College basketball is every sports lover's meeting ground. Each March, with the coming of the NCAA basketball tournament, football, baseball, hockey, and curling fans come together to fill out a bracket, pick a Cinderella, and skip out of work early to catch the opening round of games. Sports fans live to see some David topple a Goliath, and it's this underdog mentality that fuels Sega's *NCAA College Basketball 2K3*.

While NBA 2K3 is a tighter (and perhaps better) game from top to bottom, it doesn't have the same energy, rabid fanbase, or guts as *NCAA*. The passing is cleaner here than in its NBA cousin, plus, the game is pleasantly more run-and-gun. *NCAA* suffers, however, in some of its animations (jumpshots look decidely ugly), and even with its gameplay. Crossovers and spin moves aren't as effective as they should be, and post-up game needs some work; this keeps *NCAA* from greatness.

Even though it's not the NBA, *NCAA*'s real bread and butter is the Legacy mode. You take over a crap team, and your mission is to win the national championship: Make waves and you'll be promoted to better teams, don't and you'll get canned. You recruit, play hard, cross your fingers, and if key players stick around, they could go pro and you might accomplish your goals.

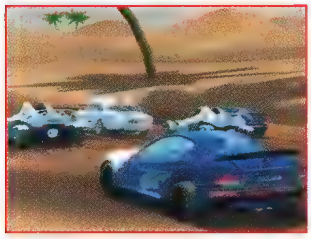
While this won't have you painting your face school colors before you go online to take on some braggart Duke alum, it's the best (and by best we mean only) college hoops game existing on Xbox.

Todd Zuniga

Seven out of Ten

RALLY FUSION

Dev : Climax
Pub : Activision
Players : 1-4
Rally round : The mountain
Origin : U.K.



Not at all real rally racing, *Fusion* does manage to be a fun racing game.

A few years ago, the hot rumor had Activsion buying Midway. Perhaps *Rally Fusion* started development during this time, because it feels like a Midway arcade game, in the vein of *San Francisco Rush*. Big, bright, 3Dfx-style graphics dominate, some dude yells when you make a long jump, and you receive awards for (among other things) totally destroying your car.

Compared to the other rally games on the system, like the elegant *Colin Mcrae* or fast-paced *Rallisport Challenge*, *Fusion* is sort of sad, like a 45-year-old guy wearing a Hawaiian shirt and a Jimmy Buffet hat at an art opening. It's way too arcadish, and it commits the cardinal sin of rally games: The camera always swings around so you see the back of the car, even when you're powersliding, which totally takes away from the ever-slippery, loose feeling of rally racing. Likewise, the fun of your co-driver cursing at you if you drive poorly is offset by his inability to describe turns until you're directly on top of them.

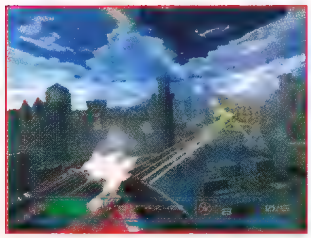
The cars all feel different, the control is nice, and there are loads of different environments to drive through (the Incan course is particularly swell). It's not at all like a real rally, mind you—despite the Michellin Race of Champions license—but the environments are fun, and the impressive scenery keeps things moving. The tracks are well-designed (including cool two-car parallel courses), and the challenge and A.I. is pretty tough. In fact, as an arcade racer set in the rally universe, this ain't half bad.

Hiroki Yamaguchi

Six out of Ten

SEABLADE

Dev : Vision Scape
Pub : Simon and Schuster
Players : 1-4
Sea : Sick
Origin : Poway, CA



Do not be fooled by this game's ostensibly pretty graphics. It is poison and may turn your liver into cottage cheese.

In the 24th century, the icecaps have melted and a civil war rages in the Earth's half-submerged cities. Elite pilots maneuver their war machines, the SeaBlades, over land and through sea and...whatever. This game makes Baby Jesus cry.

The controls are difficult and unintuitive, which is a capital offense for an action game. Those who prefer not to invert the analog stick's pitch control are simply out of luck as the game's options don't allow it. Further, the face buttons swap the two sticks' functions (thrust and steering) on-the-fly, which is the kiss of death in the middle of combat. Even crappy combat.

Enemy craft engage in straight-ahead strafing runs only. Vital power-ups are not merely rare, but also hidden. Inimical turrets, which do quite a bit more damage than hostile vessels, do not show up on the HUD. In cinematics and mission briefings, the developers sometimes try to cover the 2-frames-per-second of animation by showing that the scene is a choppy transmission; often, however, they don't even bother.

In fact, everything in this game is horribly done, aside except the in-game visuals. We suspect that this is a calculated ploy to make the game look decent in screenshots and packaging in order to swindle unwary shoppers.

Even these many criticisms cannot convey the ineffable diablerie of *SeaBlade*. Any person who has not played it is, in some subtle way, morally superior to anyone who has. Now, a solemn pact: Let us never speak of *SeaBlade* again.

Paul Byrnes

Two out of Ten

SNEAKERS

Dev : Media Vision Pub : Microsoft Players : 1 Mouse : Capades Origin : Japan

If the children are indeed our future, we'd best keep them far away from the uninspired but oh-so-cheery Xbox adventure, *Sneakers*. This game, straight out of Japan—and most likely straight onto the bargain racks—proves definitively that in a war between mice and rats, we're all losers.

Sneakers puts players in the role of Apollo the mouse. As Apollo, it's necessary to guide a four-mouse squad through a series of human-sized environments hunting for rats and candy. Sometimes, the rats team up, leading to arcade-style brawls. Puzzles of the not-so-puzzling variety are scattered throughout to add a little depth to an otherwise very shallow children's game.

Concessions are made throughout to keep things simple, and by simple, we mean dumb. The mice travel back and forth on predetermined paths, and can only select a new direction when they reach a junction point. The specific challenges here—ridding environment of rats and fighting battles—are easy enough to accomplish; individual rats can be targeted and dispatched simply by shifting to a first-person view, putting a cursor over the foe, and pressing A button. Group battles can be won by pressing one button repeatedly, and if you can't fathom the simple "push this to create a new path" puzzles, it's back to kindergarten for you. Oh, and the game's infinitely looped, saccharine-sweet piano music and French-style accordion tunes may in fact turn children into the hockey-mask wearing, ax-wielding maniacs we alway see in the movies.

This game of mice versus rats makes us want to seek the assistance of a professionally licensed exterminator.

Greg Orlando

Three out of Ten

X-MEN: NEXT DIMENSION

Dev : Paradox Pub : Activision Players : 1 - 2 Y, God, Y? Origin :

The venerable and uncanny X-Men, whose characterization and social allegory have raised the bar for superhero comics for nearly 40 years, do not deserve the disgrace that is *Next Dimension*.

To begin with, the game's mutants are ugly and lifeless. Beast looks like Blanka trying to sneak into *Virtua Fighter* circa 1993, and Sabretooth is a grubby Ozzfest roadie. Since the X-Men hail from an entirely visual medium, it's a travesty the developers did not take more care with the heroes' visual appearance.

If the characters don't look as kick-ass as they do in the comics, maybe it's because they're not kicking much ass. The moves in this game tend towards woefully underpowered punches and kicks. This sissy slap-fighting powers a character's super meters, which allow more effective attacks using mutant powers. A player must suffer through an interminable internship of feeble chop-socky before he can be a doctor of mutant pain-giving, but being a doctor of mutant pain-giving (right from the start) is what the game should be all about.

Hulk, er, Juggernaut smash! Wolverine eats concrete, and Professor X uses his telepathy to fool you into thinking this game rocks!

Next Dimension has technical problems, too. The camera makes no effort to avoid occluding pillars and scenery. Frequently the animations of the thrower and the throwee do not match up and, quite often, an X-Man just misses a hard-earned super attack because, for no earthly reason, he somehow wasn't directly facing his opponent.

We have seen the *Next Dimension*, and we say: Go back!

Paul Byrnes

Three out of Ten

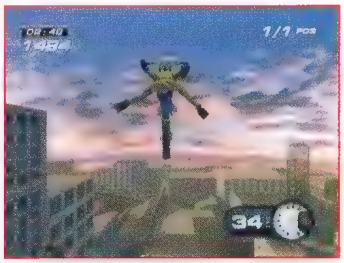
MX SUPERFLY

Dev : Pacific Pub : THQ Players : 1 - 4 Superfly : I'm Gonna Git You Sucka Origin : Santa Clara, CA

Extreme sports games have been rushing to our consoles in droves ever since the success of *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater*. We've seen some brilliant games thanks to the trend, such as *SSX* and all the *Hawks*; *MX Superfly* is a merely decent effort to capitalize on gamers' thirst for a CRT version of every in-your-face physical activity.

The good news is the controls here are tight and responsive. There's a certain poetry to charging the bike's shocks just right in order to get the desired height and length from a jump. Similarly, popping in the clutch just as the bike lands gives a satisfying burst of speed. The bad news is that, although the tracks look fine, background elements are uglier than they should be. In fact, flying off the track in the right (wrong?) place reveals that the people in the stands are faceless, low-poly hobbits about half as tall as the racers.

Worse, *Superfly*'s physics are unpredictable and frustrating. If a racer lands just a bit wrong, he'll stop dead and have to accelerate anew. Rather than implementing a checkpoint system to keep racers on the course, *Superfly* forces an offtrack rider to fall down, pushed by a giant phantom hand, whereupon they are replaced on the one true path."



We've seen a dragonfly and a housefly. We've seen a butterfly and a shoofly. But we've never, ever seen a superfly.

Finally, inconsistencies in the Save Game system waste time and might cause lost progress. Although the game insists on saving the options after every race—even if nothing has changed—it won't automatically save games, or even prompt to save.

Paul Byrnes

Four out of Ten

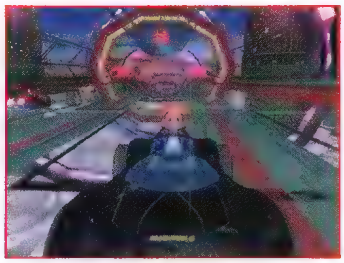
PULSE RACER

Dev : Jaleco Pub : Jaleco Players : 1 - 4 Pulse? : Not Hardly Origin : Someone's butt

Cashing in on the hottest genres, producing crappy top-selling sequels, releasing buggy titles months in advance to meet quarterly results: These are the inalienable rights of every game developer that we at *Xbox Nation* duly recognize, and often endure. After all, it's a free market out there and if companies can successfully peddle a turd, well, who's really more to blame? But when a game as bad as *Pulse Racer* comes rolling through the office, it makes us seriously reconsider our code of tolerance.

Combining the tired old futuristic-racer concept with the equally tired world of kart racing, *Pulse* is a strange and unhappy marriage of genre clichés. This is an Xbox game—and it just looks putrid. The tracks in *Pulse* are uninspired and painfully lacking in visual detail. Even more laughable are the vehicles themselves, which look more like bumper cars than state-of-the-art speed demons.

Pulse's worst crime isn't even that it looks hideous (both technically and artistically); the real sin here is its lack of feel. There's very little gameplay to be had, even while *Pulse* tries to innovate with its "rubber-banding around corners" technique and a ho-hum track editor mode. (Another quandary: why would you create tracks for a game none of your friends would touch with 10-foot pole?)



We checked this game for a pulse, and it was strictly dead on arrival. On the other hand, it makes a great coaster.

Rent *Pulse Racer* for a chuckle if you're morbidly curious; otherwise, save yourself the hate, the anguish, the pain, and all the resultant unclean feelings.

The end of the world is near.

Che Chou

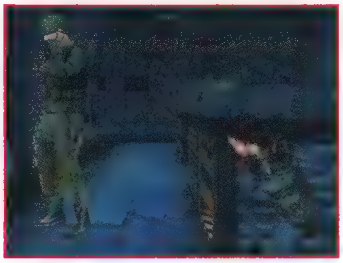
Two out of Ten

DARK ANGEL

Dev : Radical Ent. Pub : Sierra/Fox Interactive Players : 1 Angel : Fallen Origin : Vancouver, Canada

Despite the cancellation of the television series, Fox Interactive and Sierra have gone ahead and released James Cameron's *Dark Angel*; a title that promised to thrust gamers into the life of Max, the too-gorgeous-for-words genetically enhanced mayhem machine played by Jessica Alba. What the actual game ends up being, however, is the inspiration for Mr. Cameron's next trip down to the ocean floor. He is going to want to dump every copy of this interactive embarrassment bearing his name into a cold, harsh place that never sees the light of day.

It seems that if a player guides Max through graphically mediocre legions of thugs (who deserve sloppily controlled beatings), she will be able to unravel not only the secrets of her creation, but a host of other government conspiracies and scientific conundrums. Every level plays exactly the same (with the appearance of a random *Matrix*-like effect and a Rage attack that lays out everyone in the vicinity), every boss follows the same dopey attack pattern, and the collision detection is a nightmare. Do not blink your eyes after you find a weapon, by the way, because it will disappear quickly for no apparent reason (other than the old "weapon disappears after using it" rule).



■ Here we see Floyd the Guard checking his watch to see how much longer he must endure the digital embarrasment that is *Dark Angel*.

Not even the attempted sensuality of a rendered Alba is enough to keep anyone interested, and learning to play the guitar would be a much more rewarding way to develop finger calluses than meandering your way through this putrid button masher.

These are dark days, indeed.

Russ Garbutt

Two out of Ten

LEGENDS OF WRESTLING II

Dev : Acclaim Pub : Acclaim Players : 1 - 4 Andre : Gigantic Origin : Salt Lake City, UT

Here's the Legend of a good fight gone bad, a hotly contested ladder match of a wrestling game where the combatants climb ever higher in search of the prize, but ultimately end up hurtling to the unyielding canvas below. *Only there is no canvas. There is only toilet.*

Forget the many improvements that would have launched *Legends of Wrestling II* far beyond its predecessor. Painful as it sounds, the new wrestlers, the wonderful interview clips, the souped-up Career mode, etc., did not redeem a game that, at its core, holds fundamental flaws.

Perplexing camera shifts occur when two grapplers get near the foreground ropes, horribly obscuring the action. Four-way brawls disintegrate when two combatants go outside the ring and two stay within its confines; the camera displays a great hatred for capturing all the action when this occurs, and more than a few times, player-controlled wrestlers will be caught off-screen. Stupid A.I. ensures that computer-controlled fighters will ignore the grapplers they've supposedly developed a hate for, and stand idly by while pins are being made.

■ *Legends of Wrestling II* comes with a screeching and pounding rock soundtrack that's acid for the ears.

To top off this mess, the game also shipped with crash bugs. During two separate Three-Way Dance matches in Career mode pins were made, and the third grappler interrupted the count by putting boot to skull. Although the three-count stopped and the player was awarded a bonus for breaking up a pinfall, the pin animations did not stop. Kee-rash. Waiting for the third strike would be folly.

Greg Orlando

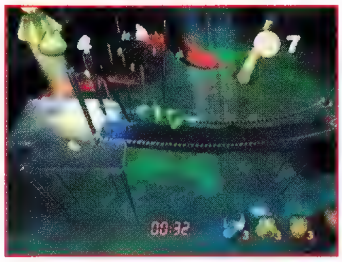
Four out of Ten

FROGGER BEYOND

Dev : Konami Pub : Konami Players : 1 - 2 Frog : Legs Origin : Redwood City, CA

Twe swampy green one returns. *Frogger Beyond* has the same tile-based gameplay found in *Zapper* and *Frogger Swampy's Revenge*. This time, the frog has a touch of Indiana Jones in him: he solves puzzles, rolls through Mayan-like tunnels, and avoids moving boulders. *Beyond* does a decent job dealing with odd 3D camera angles for its 2D-styled gameplay, although it's not recommended for the post-adolescents among us.

Raina Lee



Four out of Ten

NICKELODEON PARTY BLAST

Dev : Data Design Pub : Infogrames Players : 1 - 4 Blast : This with a shotgun Origin : U.K.

We can only imagine the title *Nickelodeon Party Blast* refers to the fact this game can easily blast any party to smithereens. Marred by slowdown and a camera that doesn't always allow you to see your character, *Party Blast* also suffers from repetitive gameplay of minigames that just weren't fun the first time.You and up to three friends compete (suffer is more like it) in simple kid games starring Nickelodeon characters until you can stomach it no more.

Carrie Shepherd

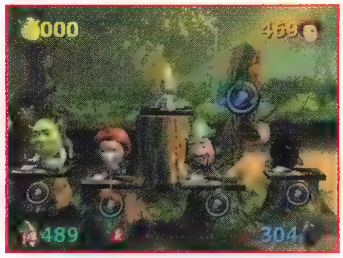
Two out of Ten

SHREK SUPER PARTY

Dev : Mass Media Pub : TDK Mediactive Players : 1 - 4 Shrek : Blech Origin : Moorpark, CA

Move around a virtual board (à la *Mario Party*, but bad), and compete in minigames to earn bug juice. We'll spare you the description, except to say that the minigames typically involve repeatedly hitting the "A" button. At the end of the challenges, a needless lengthy and confusing "bug exchange" tally occurs. Let's just say that the only way to ruin a party quicker than loading up *Shrek Super Party* is to load up *Nickelodeon Party Blast*. Stay away!

Carrie Shepherd



Three out of Ten

SUPER BUBBLE POP

Dev : Rune Craft Pub : Jaleco Players : 1 - 2 Pop: Goes the weasel Origin : Japan

Super Bubble Pop 2 juxtaposes candy bubbles with saccharine dance music. As a "popper," you shoot multicolored bubbles onto a grid of moving columns, with the objective of matching colored bubbles into groups of three or more. At best, *Pop is Bust-A-Move* in 3D, but with useless power-ups and poor visibility on the moving 3D board. The game is playable until you realized that, like cheap champagne, its effervescence wears off fast.

Raina Lee

Three out of Ten

REWIND

Go forward to the past with *Xbox Nation*'s old reviews

Aggressive Inline
Dev: Z-Axis Pub: AKA Acclaim
It's a competent *THPS* clone with a few nifty twists to set it apart.
XBN Rating: **7**

Amped: Snowboarding
Dev: Microsoft Pub: Microsoft
Amped for a somewhat mediocre sim? This is it.
XBN Rating: **6**

Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance
Dev: Snowblind Pub: Interplay
Alliance is a bastion of traditional aesthetics backed by rich talent.
XBN Rating: **7**

Blinx: The Time Sweeper
Dev: Artoo Pub: Microsoft
The game is flawed to a degree that it fails to entertain, despite a truly original premise.
XBN Rating: **6**

Blood Omen II
Dev: Terminal Reality Pub: Majesco
Want a cold, ruthless, bloodthirsty anti-hero to keep you busy? Kain fits the bill.
XBN Rating: **7**

Blood Rayne
Dev: Terminal Reality Pub: Majesco
BloodRayne neither sucks nor bites. We wanted blood. Instead, we got ketchup.
XBN Rating: **6**

Buffy the Vampire Slayer
Dev: The Collective Pub: EA
Remarkably fun to play and pretty to look at. Surprisingly good.
XBN Rating: **8**

Burnout
Dev: Criterion Pub: Acclaim
Burnout is a solid competitor. It's fast, fun and oddly addictive.
XBN Rating: **7**

Chase
Dev: I-Imagine Pub: Bam
A competent effort and reasonably enjoyable, overall very little stands out.
XBN Rating: **6**

Commandos 2: Men of Courage
Dev: Pyro Pub: Eidos
Not simple, not easy to get into, and certainly not for everyone, but enjoyable.
XBN Rating: **7**

Crash Bandicoot
Dev: Traveller's Tales Pub: Universal
Who is this Crash Bandicoot and what's with this mediocre platformer?
XBN Rating: **6**

Crazy Taxi 3: High Roller
Dev: Sega Pub: Acclaim
Not necessarily a bad thing, but it plays almost identically to the original.
XBN Rating: **6**

Dark Summit
Dev: Radical Entertainment Pub: THQ
Extreme sports + extreme combat = extreme stretch.
XBN Rating: **5**

Dave Mirra's BMX 2
Dev: Z-Axis Pub: Acclaim
Endless combos and more rs make for some good times, but still average.
XBN Rating: **5**

Dead or Alive 3
Dev: Team Ninja Pub: Tecmo
Far from the best fighter ever made... despite what its developer may claim.
XBN Rating: **7**

Dead to Rights
Dev: Namco Pub: Namco
Its biggest flaw is lack of charisma, reflected in nearly every facet of the game.
XBN Rating: **6**

Dragon's Lair 3D: Return to the Lair
Dev: DragonStone Pub: Ubi Soft
Check this one out. You're not likely to be disappointed.
XBN Rating: **7**

Deathrow
Dev : Southend Pub : Ubi Soft
This fast paced mixture of fighting and sport blends into an impressively amusing mix.
XBN Rating: **6**

Dynasty Warriors 3
Dev: Koei Pub: Koei
Provides 110 percent of the USDA allowance of Vitamin Killitude.
XBN Rating: **8**

Eggmania: Eggstreme Madness
Dev: Hot Gen Studios Limited Pub: Kemco
Fairly addictive puzzle-game that doesn't require a huge learning curve.
XBN Rating: **5**

Elder Scrolls 3: Morrowind
Dev/Pub: Bethesda Softworks
Hundreds of hours of gameplay and ultimate replay value.
XBN Rating: **8**

ESPN MLS Extra Time 2002
Dev: Konami Pub: Konami
An exercise in extreme frustration.
XBN Rating: **7**

Fatal Frame
Dev: Tecmo Pub: Tecmo
We would like to forgive its unsatisfying combat and puzzles, but we cannot.
XBN Rating: **6**

FIFA Soccer 2003
Dev: EA Sports Pub: EA Sports
Marred only by a lack of depth off the field, it's one of the better efforts this year.
XBN Rating: **8**

FIFA World Cup 2002
Dev: EA Sports Pub: Electronic Arts
While it may not be the deepest soccer game around, FIFA is just plain fun.
XBN Rating: **7**

Fuzion Frenzy
Dev: Blitz Games Pub: Microsoft
45 games designed for multiplayer, which is where (limited) fun is to be had.
XBN Rating: **6**

Gauntlet: Dark Legacy
Dev: Midway Pub: Midway
Upholding tradition as a hectic, kill-'em-all game with more magic than muck.
XBN Rating: **6**

Genma Onimusha
Dev: Capcom Pub: Capcom
Great, aside from the inherent control issues.
XBN Rating: **7**

GunValkyrie
Dev: Smilebit Pub: Sega
Proves it takes more than cool characters and flash to make a great game.
XBN Rating: **7**

Halo
Dev: Bungie Pub: Microsoft
The best Xbox game available, and one of the finest games ever made.
XBN Rating: **10**

Hitman 2: Silent Assassin
Dev: Io Interactive Pub: Eidos
One of the most enjoyable games to land on Xbox yet.
XBN Rating: **8**

House of the Dead 3
Dev: Wow Pub: Sega
It's a nice shooter, and death becomes Sega.
XBN Rating: **7**

Hunter: The Reckoning
Dev: Digital Mayhem Pub: Interplay
Despite rough edges, it's an early contender for dark horse of the year.
XBN Rating: **8**

James Bond: Nightfire
Dev: EA Games Pub: Eurocom
Sadly, the shaking and stirring fun ends far too soon.
XBN Rating: **8**

Jedi Knight 2: Jedi Outcast
Dev: Raven Pub: Lucas Arts
Solid stuff: George Lucas should be proud.
XBN Rating: **7**

Jedi Starfighter
Dev: Secret Level Pub: LucasArts
Weighs in a tad too light, but still worth taking for a spin.
XBN Rating: **7**

Jet Set Radio Future
Dev: Smilebit Pub: Sega
Provides a beautiful escape from violent realism. Joyful.
XBN Rating: **8**

Knockout Kings 2002
Dev: Blck Ops Pub: EA
The idea of a boxing simulation is shattered with this year's go-round.
XBN Rating: **6**

Legends of Wrestling
Dev: Acclaim Pub: Acclaim
This is as good as wrestling gets on the Xbox.
XBN Rating: **6**

Madden NFL 2002
Dev: EA Sports Pub: EA Sports
Simply not as fun as its more joypad-friendly competition (Fever and NFL 2K2).
XBN Rating: **7**

Madden NFL 2003
Dev: EA Sports Pub: EA Sports
Electronic Arts ups the ante with its finest Madden in years.
XBN Rating: **9**

Matt Hoffman's Pro BMX 2
Dev: Rainbow Studios Pub: Activision
Besides the painfully slow process of opening new levels, a solid game.
XBN Rating: **7**

Max Payne
Dev: Remedy Pub: Rockstar
Flawed in more ways than one, but still one hell of a ride.
XBN Rating: **8**

MechAssault
Dev: Day 1 Studios Pub: Microsoft
It won't blow your mind but it's a solid showcase for online console gaming.
XBN Rating: **7**

Medal of Honor: Frontline
Dev: Dreamworks Int. **Pub:** EA Games
Doesn't offer much in terms of new content compared to the PS2.
XBN Rating: **7**

Metal Gear Solid 2: Substance
Dev: Konami **Pub:** Konami
Action-adventure games don't get much better than this.
XBN Rating: **9**

Moto GP
Dev: Climax **Pub:** THQ
Potential to satisfy both gear-heads and a good chunk of wannabe bikers alike.
XBN Rating: **8**

Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance
Dev: Midway **Pub:** Midway
As a channel to manifest your competitive spirit, there's not enough depth.
XBN Rating: **6**

Munch's Oddysee
Dev: Oddworld **Pub:** Microsoft
Odd and repetitive, but ultimately satisfying.
XBN Rating: **8**

MX 2002 Feat. Ricky C.
Dev: Pacific Coast **Pub:** THQ
Enhanced visuals, expanded multiplayer modes, but still mediocre.
XBN Rating: **6**

NBA Inside Drive
Dev: High Voltage **Pub:** Microsoft
Easily the most polished hoop game ever made, but still second-rate.
XBN Rating: **6**

NBA Live 2002
Dev: EA Canada **Pub:** EA Sports
The "finest" hoop game available...aside from NBA 2K2.
XBN Rating: **8**

NBA Live 2003
Dev: EA Sports **Pub:** EA Sports
Up-tempo action and innovative control.
XBN Rating: **7**

NBA 2K2
Dev: Visual Concepts **Pub:** Sega
The finest basketball game we've played.
XBN Rating: **9**

NBA 2K3
Dev: Visual Concepts **Pub:** Sega Sports
VC has done it again, and remains ahead of the hoops curve.
XBN Rating: **8**

NCAA 2K3
Dev: Visual Concepts **Pub:** Sega
Worth checking out, but NCAA 2003 offers more bang for the buck.
XBN Rating: **7**

NCAA Football 2003
Dev: EA Sports **Pub:** EA Players
Perhaps the finest college football game ever made.
XBN Rating: **8**

Need for Speed: Hot Pursuit 2
Dev: EA Studios **Pub:** Electronic Arts
Outrunning the cops while racing on gorgeous international tracks is damn fun.
XBN Rating: **7**

NFL Blitz 20-02
Dev: Midway **Pub:** Midway
Breaks tradition in that it's not last year's model with graphical improvements.
XBN Rating: **7**

NFL Blitz 20-03
Dev: Midway **Pub:** Midway
Same damn thing with slightly better graphics.
XBN Rating: **6**

NFL Fever 2003
Dev: Microsoft **Pub:** Microsoft
Plays realistically while maintaining a tight flow, and it looks very nice.
XBN Rating: **8**

NFL 2K2
Dev: Visual Concepts **Pub:** Sega
Better than Madden.
XBN Rating: **9**

NFL 2K3
Dev: Visual Concepts **Pub:** Sega
Pure pigskin joy; from ESPN-sponsored presentation to flawless gameplay.
XBN Rating: **9**

NHL Hitz 2002
Dev: Black Box **Pub:** Midway
Fast-paced play that simulates hockey without recreating it.
XBN Rating: **6**

NHL 2002
Dev: EA Canada **Pub:** EA Sports
This rides the line well between simulation and arcade deftly.
XBN Rating: **8**

NHL 2003
Dev: EA Sports **Pub:** EA Sports
There's just enough innovation here to warrant spending another 50 clams.
XBN Rating: **7**

NHL Hitz 20-03
Dev: Midway **Pub:** Midway
Hitz will wear out its welcome due to lack of strategic depth.
XBN Rating: **7**

Outlaw Golf
Dev: Hypnotix **Pub:** Simon & Schuster
Truly, this was the way golf was meant to be played. With strippers.
XBN Rating: **7**

Phantom Crash
Dev: Genki **Pub:** Phantagram Interactive
Easily one of the finest mech shooters to date.
XBN Rating: **8**

Prisoner of War
Dev: Wide Games **Pub:** Codemasters
Remains a satisfying (if difficult) challenge for brains and reflexes.
XBN Rating: **7**

Project Gotham Racing
Dev: Bizarre Creations **Pub:** Microsoft
Beautiful bastard child of simulation and arcade.
XBN Rating: **8**

Quantum Redshift
Dev: Curly Monsters **Pub:** Microsoft
Repetitive structure, overly familiar mechanics, and conspicuous lack of style.
XBN Rating: **6**

Rallisport Challenge
Dev: Digital Illusions **Pub:** Microsoft
What begins as a lesson in patience eventually leads to something better: pride.
XBN Rating: **8**

Robotech: Battlecry
Dev: Vicious Cycle **Pub:** TDK
Delivers plenty of nostalgia, but that only gets you so far.
XBN Rating: **6**

Rocky
Dev: Rage **Pub:** Ubi Soft
Fights are fast and fun, though slightly tuned for a button-masher's sensibilities.
XBN Rating: **7**

Sega GT 2002
Dev: WOW Entertainment **Pub:** Sega
Well-designed and playable, with a fair learning curve and gorgeous visuals.
XBN Rating: **8**

Shenmue 2
Dev: Sega / AM2 **Pub:** Microsoft
"Flawed Masterpiece." It is both exciting and dull, spellbinding and frustrating.
XBN Rating: **7**

Shrek
Dev: Dice **Pub:** Dreamworks
It has its moments, but our score was very generous.
XBN Rating: **6**

Silent Hill 2
Dev: Konami **Pub:** Konami
Obscure puzzles and some epic plodding almost obscured by a twisty plot.
XBN Rating: **8**

Spider-Man
Dev: Treyarch **Pub:** Activision
Spider-Man really does whatever a spider can. And that's quite a feat.
XBN Rating: **7**

Splashdown
Dev: Rainbow Studios **Pub:** Infogrames
Repetitive at times, but enjoyable nonetheless.
XBN Rating: **7**

SSX Tricky
Dev: EA Canada **Pub:** EA
A near-classic, and one of the most addictive games we've ever played.
XBN Rating: **8**

Steel Battalion
Dev: Capcom **Pub:** Capcom
Dares to push both mind and body, and sets a new precedent in its genre.
XBN Rating: **10**

Taz: Wanted
Dev: Blitz Games **Pub:** Infogrames
Simple Saturday morning fun with puzzle-solving elements.
XBN Rating: **7**

The Thing
Dev: Computer Artworks **Pub:** Black Label
It just suffers a few missteps that keep it from ranking in the upper echelon of titles.
XBN Rating: **7**

THPS 2X
Dev: Neversoft/Treyarch **Pub:** Activision
Do yourself a favor and play this with Controller S rather than the Xbox pad.
XBN Rating: **6**

THPS 3
Dev: Treyarch **Pub:** Activision
Quantum leap? No. Fun as hell? Natch.
XBN Rating: **8**

Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2003
Dev: EA Sports **Pub:** EA Sports
Even if you never play a full 18, you'll get your money's worth from this one.
XBN Rating: **8**

Time Splitters 2
Dev: Free Radical **Pub:** Eidos
One of the finest shooters since the seminal *GoldenEye*.
XBN Rating: **8**

Toejam & Earl 3: Mission to Earth
Dev: Visual Concepts **Pub:** Sega
Weird and beautiful. Consider this Mission only a partial success.
XBN Rating: **7**

Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon
Dev: Red Storm **Pub:** Ubi Soft
A hyper-realistic combat simulator where patience is just as important as courage.
XBN Rating: **8**

Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell
Dev: Ubi Soft Montreal **Pub:** Ubi Soft
Not an instant classic, *Splinter Cell* is a solid title.
XBN Rating: **8**

Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4
Dev: Neversoft **Pub:** Activision
Skater 4 is solid, and would have scored two points higher had it included online play.
XBN Rating: **7**

Transworld Snowboarding
Dev: Housemarque **Pub:** Infogrames
Snowboarding equals good, and will appeal to snowboarders. Lacks universal appeal.
XBN Rating: **6**

Turok: Evolution
Dev: Acclaim **Pub:** Acclaim
Sadly, the stakes have been raised and *Turok* is out of the game.
XBN Rating: **6**

Unreal Championship
Dev: Digital Extremes **Pub:** Atari
It remains good and violent fun; we were just hoping for a bit more polish.
XBN Rating: **7**

Total Immersion Racing
Dev: Razorworks **Pub:** Empire Interactive
For our money, it rivals NASCAR of F1 for unadulterated excitement.
XBN Rating: **6**

Triple Play 2002
Dev: EA Sports **Pub:** EA Sports
Can't hold a candle to *World Series Baseball*.
XBN Rating: **6**

Wreckless
Dev: Bunkasha **Pub:** Activision
Though frustrating at times, it's still loads of fun.
XBN Rating: **8**

World Series Baseball
Dev: Blue Shift/VC **Pub:** Sega
If realism is the ultimate goal of the game maker, then this is the Mona Lisa.
XBN Rating: **9**

THIS IS A MODDIN' WORLD

As videogaming's ascent to the mainstream reaches critical mass, a subculture of Xbox owners is reclaiming the hobby for the homebrew crew

Words: Che Chou · Illustration: Andre Sibayan

There's an underground revolution heating up the Xbox, turning the heads of both hardcore gamers and Microsoft executives. The guerillas of this secret war wage battles against gaming's multibillion dollar establishment on Internet forums, IRC chatrooms, FTP servers, and in the bedrooms of restless thousands. Their weapon: the mod chip, a device that, in the right hands, transforms the Xbox into an unstoppable set-top box. Their manifesto: to break the shackles of corporate gaming and foster marginalized talent by showcasing homebrewed games and applications.

Signing up for a piece of the promised land is where the revolution gets tricky. Unlike politically driven uprisings, the decentralized nature of the Xbox mod movement makes it a fertile field of factional infighting and philosophical bickering. Adding fuel to the enterprise of hacking your Xbox is the fact that, at the moment, at least three different mod-chip makers are hawking their goods on the web, and more than 25 different bios sets (or mini-operating systems), that all make a pronounced difference in terms of how a modified Xbox performs, can be had. Redmond's 800-pound gorilla has trained its sights on the mod-chip underground with a fervor that has many small-time enthusiasts concerned for their legal and financial well-being. Yet, with new shareware hitting the Internet on a daily—nay, hourly—basis, the mod insurgence has a momentum not easily ignored. This month, XBN Author [illegible] explores the [illegible] of this modding world.

Is it Legal?

So you're ready to tear open your Xbox and slap in that mod chip, but something's nagging at your law-abiding conscience? Is what you're about to do technically legal? The answer, unfortunately, is no. When you solder, snap-on, or screw the mod chip onto your motherboard, you are breaking the law. The simple act of modifying your system has been declared illegal under the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) which passed in 1998. Under this law, any device for the purpose of circumventing copy protection violates this act. Mod chips, which bypass the Xbox's original operating system (or bios) in lieu of hacked instruction sets, certainly fall under this category.

As for applications and emulators coded and ported by members of the scene, it's a bit more complicated. Even though all of the homebrew stuff is completely original work created by one for the benefit of all, they're still technically illegal. That's right, these shareware programs, created to run on an Xbox, use copyrighted material to create the executable files. Due to the use of this copyrighted material, the files themselves become illegal to distribute.

All hope isn't lost. In the last four years, there has yet to be a significant court case that has put mod chips up against the DMCA. If mod groups can prove in court that the primary use of a mod chip are for means other than piracy, and that circumventing the copy protection is simply a side effect of homebrew development, then this might open the doorway for the legality of mod chips. There's also extensive research currently happening on an open development kit that will forego the use of Microsoft's proprietary code required to create homebrew software. But until that glorious day when gaming is truly liberated for the masses, mod an Xbox, go to jail. It's the law, son!

XBN first made the acquaintance of Jeremy, a computer science major at the University of California Santa Cruz, when he contacted us to pitch an article about the incredible possibilities of Xbox mod chips. Kids like him populate the frontlines of the illegal Xbox underground. At 23 years old, Jeremy considers himself a moderately hardcore gamer who buys two to three games a month, beats about a third of them, and then hops online to discuss said titles on Web forums. He also loves the classic games from his youth. It's this nostalgia for the past that first drew him to mod chips. "At first, I thought all the Xbox mod chip did was allow you to play import games," he says. "Since we all know the Xbox lacks anything worth a damn in Japan, I simply didn't care about modding my Xbox, initially."

Jeremy's call to join the hacking avant garde came after he read *Xbox Nation*'s "Hacking the Xbox" feature in *XBN #4* and learned mod chips not only bypass territorial lockouts, but also give you full access to the guts of the system. "That's when I went, 'Wow...there's something incredibly subversive about playing *Super Mario World* on your Xbox,' he says. "The reason this machine is the most powerful system on the market is because it's essentially a PC." Jeremy believes that, in the interest of making the Xbox behave more like a sexy console (and less like an unhip computer that runs on your TV), Microsoft has "buried the system's versatility and locked its owners out of all this incredible potential."

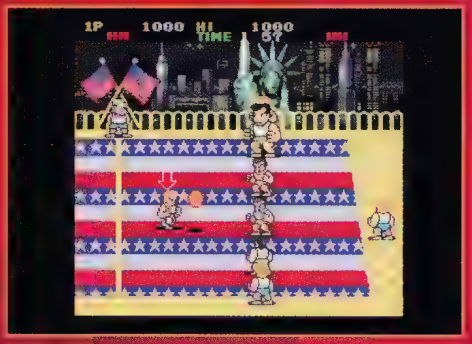
All of this unearthed potential, as well as the thriving homebrew revolution, owes much to the doctorate research of one Andrew "Bunnie" Huang, a post-graduate student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who singlehandedly cracked Xbox security. Without his legwork (and thesis paper), which paved the way for others to hack into the Xbox, the insurgence as we know it today would be nonexistent. Based on Huang's findings, hackers devised mod chips to circumvent the area on the Xbox circuit board that stores its operating system, commonly called the bios. Think of the bios as the heart of the Xbox, a set of instructions telling the console how to behave and communicate to its many components. Once the bios is replaced, the Xbox essentially sheds its console exterior and reverts back to what it was to begin with: a scaled-down PC, sans mouse and keyboard.

Thanks to an inherently flawed security system and its PC likeness, the Xbox mod scene is unlike any in the history of console gaming, surpassing even the once-promising Dreamcast underground. To wit, Jeremy shows us his Xbox, which has undergone major internal surgery. Where the standard 8 GB hard drive used to be is now a whopping 120 GB monster (stocked with, we're told, no fewer than 14 gigs of classic gaming goodness). Lifting the DVD drive reveals a mass of soldered wires and the mod chip itself, nestled snugly in between a ribbon cable and a city of diodes. Jeremy tells us that now that his Xbox has been modified and hooked up to the Internet, the console has taken on a life of its own.

"An Xbox without a live wire is like a computer without Internet access. It feels dead," he says. Aside from using the box as an all-region DVD player and an emulator of old-school games, Jeremy checks the Web daily for updates from the scene on new homebrew releases. "There's a constant trickle of shareware coming out—new apps like Xbox media players that play MP3, MPEG and DIVX formats, FTP clients that allow you to download programs directly from your Xbox, or updated dashboards that provide more stability, functionality, and customization for all the mod-heads out there."

If you think all this sounds too good to be true, well, it isn't—but there is a price to pay for would-be comrades of the mod-chip revolution. First and foremost, there's the difficult matter of installing the chip. "Your typical mainstream gamer will give up as soon as they hear the words 'solder' and 'wires,'" Jeremy says. "To that, I say they should look into picking up a Xodus Matrix chip that basically snaps onto the motherboard. It's not beginner stuff, so while I think the mod scene will continue to grow, I don't think it'll ever pose much of a threat to Microsoft and their overall business model."

And then there's Microsoft, a company whose empire was built on corporate aggression, and their active efforts to stymie hackers. In 2002, Seattle's finest made physical changes to the motherboard to block mod chips; to its disappointment, the new scheme was hacked within weeks. Then there's Xbox Live; modified systems attempting to log into Xbox Live will be summarily banned. Still, Jeremy is convinced that now is the time to join the movement. "The Xbox is a dream come true for hackers and gamers," he tells us. "There's just so much you can do with the system once it's modded. I can guarantee you that with the Xbox 2, Microsoft won't be nearly as sloppy when it comes to security. Gamers will never have it this good again."



Reaping the harvest of the mod-chip revolution

For most gamers, console emulators and their respective games are the primary reason they bust open their Xboxes and go through the anguish of applying a mod chip. But in the eyes of the law, most people who enjoy emulated games are pirates. (You'd be hard-pressed to find someone who physically owns gigabytes worth of actual classic games in their original pressing).

But it's not all Pirates of the Carribean out in the vast sea of mod chips. Within six months of hacking the Xbox, bedroom enthusiasts have already made earnest inroads into independent games development.

Some have taken id Software's much revered *Doom* and *Quake 2* games and ported them to the Xbox with better-than-perfect results. *Doom* puts Xbox hardware to good use with faster framerates and overall less-jagged graphics. In the case of *Quake 2*, the controls are mapped neatly to the Xbox controller, making gameplay and feel more of a *Halo*-esque affair.

Other indie games include *X-Marbles*, a simple, yet addictive puzzle game; and *InvaderX*, a rather soulless *Space Invaders* remake of the arcade classic. There's even an original Xbox version of *Pac-Man* called...you guessed it, *Pac-ManX*.

DAVID CROSS

Star of Mr. Show and all-around hilarious bastard, David Cross talks to *Xbox Nation* about Devo, "number two," and the unbearable lightness of being funny.

Interview conducted by Nate Denver

David Cross is a hilarious human who wears glasses. As cocreator and costar of the completely weird and brilliant sketch comedy show *Mr. Show with Bob and David* (R.I.P.), he's been loved by many and ignored by many more. His commentary on politics, religion, society, and rednecks is consistently sharp and dead-on, placing him in the company of greats such as Bill Hicks, Lenny Bruce, and Chris Rock. Since *Mr. Show* ended a few years ago, Cross moved to New York, appeared in *Men In Black II*, did a national stand-up tour, and released a double CD recorded at one of the tour shows called *Shut Up You Fucking Baby*. He plays videogames and doesn't listen to the radio or death metal.

***Xbox Nation*: You live in New York now?**
Cross: I do.

***XBN*: That's where half-moon cookies live.**
Cross: Where what?

***XBN*: Half-moon cookies. Some people call them black-and-white cookies, but they have half chocolate frosting, half vanilla frosting, and they're very good.**
Cross: Well, I'll tell ya what, get yourself a jar of black frosting and a jar of fucking vanilla frosting and go to it.

***XBN*: What's your favorite medium? Stand-up, movies, sketches?**
Cross: Oh, I like all of it. I guess my first love, the one I lost my virginity to, is stand-up. That's the most satisfying. Working on a TV show or a movie is kind of fun, looking back on it is okay and the final product is okay, but ultimately the most fun, the most creatively satisfying, the one that has the most immediate effect, is stand-up.

***XBN*: Since you've become known, have you been able to do stand-up in front of people that might not agree with your ideas on politics or religion?**
Cross: Oh, it was completely different six years ago.

***XBN*: Was it more fun when people didn't know what to expect?**
Cross: It's all fun. I really do miss being able to fool an audience, like going up and doing a character and surprising them and making them feel uncomfortable. I'm not really able to do that, which I used to do a lot, but the trade-off is you have a lot of people who are into what you're saying, which I didn't have for many many years. So that's nice too.

***XBN*: What kind of characters would you do?**
Cross: I'd go up like I was retarded or like I was really gay, like very effeminate and nervous because it was my first time, and I'd have someone introduce that. Just do little things like that to make the audience uncomfortable and just freak out a little bit.

***XBN*: What is your writing process for stand-up?**
Cross: It's all onstage. I jot shit down, I do it onstage and the good stuff I try to keep, and then I keep doing that over and over again.

***XBN*: Your first major job was writing for the *Ben Stiller Show*; did you get that through stand-up?**
Cross: No, I was friends with Janeane Garofalo who was on the show, and I had submitted some stuff and I didn't really try to get the gig. I wasn't that interested. I was doing a fairly successful sketch show in Boston, and then I got completely and wholly tired of being poor and I said, "Fuck it, I'm just gonna do this show."

***XBN*: Was linking all the sketches in *Mr. Show* a big part of the writing process?**
Cross: That was a huge part of our writing process... too much. People seemed to like that, so there it is. I'm glad it's all in the past, not sitting in a room arguing about that shit anymore.

***XBN*: When was the last time you felt scared?**
Cross: Last night. It got dark, and I heard a creaking. I can't go into it.

***XBN*: When was the last time you felt embarrassed?**
Cross: I guess it would be…actually yesterday, I was over at my girlfriend's, and I took a shit. I was going to the bathroom, number two, whatever you wanna say, and there was no toilet paper, so I used her cat, and that was a struggle and I got all scratched up and it's just hard to…. I knew it was stupid when I was doing it, like, "How am I gonna get away with this?" But I did, sort of.

***XBN*: Did you get nervous when you met your girlfriend's parents for the first time?**
Cross: Well, they're Irish so they're not that bright. I'm kidding. Actually I wasn't. I was a little like, "All right, here we go." But I wasn't nervous nervous.

***XBN*: Were they expecting you to make them laugh?**
Cross: No. I think they were less interested in me than I expected. I had a little concern over that.

***XBN*: Do you come from a funny family?**
Cross: One of my sisters is pretty funny, but other than that, I wouldn't say they're that funny. The middle sister is quite funny, but it's not like my mom's a barrel of laughs or anything...she tends to be more shy and openly depressed.

***XBN*: Do you think a world without religion is possible?**
Cross: No, absolutely not.

***XBN*: What do you think would happen if the world was brainwashed and religion was wiped out of everyone's minds? How long before it'd come back?**
Cross: I think people would start helping each other out of the innate human sense of helping people without having to be dictated to. And not doing it out of a sense of a punishment and reward system that waits for them, and I just think that maybe everybody would leave everybody alone and we'd all get together and share recipes and find other things to celebrate. But then somebody would come along with some sort of mystical proof that God exists because his shoe started talking to him when he was around the corner, nobody saw it but, "I swear to God, my shoe told me that God exists and he told me to do this." And then there'd be somebody foolish enough to follow him and we'd have Mormonism all over again.

***XBN*: Do you like Devo?**
Cross: Oh yeah, very much. I actually like the middle part. I like the early stuff but I don't listen to it; I appreciate it more than the stuff that I listen to, which is the middle stuff. I just got a double live disc that came out, when I was on tour I'd just go record shopping. It's not the best quality, and I got the feeling pretty quickly that, while I'm glad to have it, I'm not going to listen to it that much. But it's nice to have in a completionist kind of way. On tour I got tons of music—you go into a town with five hours to kill and not a whole lot to do, that's what you do.

***XBN*: Is there going to be a Wicked Scepter album?**
Cross: Could be. It's all up to Tommy Mottola. We're dealing with his people and the legalities of it, so it could be next week or it could be two years away.

***XBN*: What videogames have you been playing?**
Cross: *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*. After this I'll dabble in the new James Bond game.

***XBN*: What's next for you?**
Cross: Well I'm super psyched. I'm gonna be doing an episode of *Crank Yankers*. And then that's probably it; I'm taking the year off after that. So I've been working on my prank calls, getting ready to do them and then I don't know, start the year off fresh, maybe drop out, do a couple of poetry slams and see what happens. See where it goes from there.

...and nobody saw it but, **"I swear to God, my shoe told me that God exists and he told me to do this."**

ドラゴンメア空母後部

WORLDBUILDERS

Smilebit artists Takashi Iwade and Kentaro Yoshida helped make *Panzer Dragoon Orta* one of the prettiest videogames ever. Learn their secrets in this *XBN* interview.

Take 25 of the world's best videogame artists, programmers. and designers. Set them to work on an eagerly awaited installment to a cult series. Exploit Xbox's power to create unprecedented real-time animation. And dream up some mind-bending fantasy worlds.

It's no mean feat, but Sega has pulled it off. *Panzer Dragoon Orta* is quite possibly the most beautiful game ever created.

Thirsty for more information, *Xbox Nation* went to Tokyo to meet the key artists behind this project, Takashi Iwade and Kentaro Yoshida. Together they have worked across the *Panzer Dragoon* titles since the series' 1995 inception, and are responsible for shaping the breathtaking worlds of *Orta*. How can a game possibly look this good? Only Smilebit has the answers....

***Xbox Nation:* How did you both come to work at Sega on Panzer Dragoon Orta?**

Takashi Iwade: When I first looked for a company to join, I was very influenced by Sega's *Virtua Racing*. So I joined the company in 1993 at the conception of Team Andromeda, and when work was beginning on *Panzer Dragoon* for the Saturn. After that came *Panzer Dragoon Zwei* and then *Azel* [*Panzer Dragoon Saga* in the United States], for which I did the enemy and boss design. Before work began on *Panzer Dragoon Orta,* I worked on the title *Hundred Swords* for Dreamcast.

Kentaro Yoshida: I was always a Sega fan. I joined the company in 1992 but left a year or so later to join Sony for the launch of PlayStation. After this, I went freelance and worked on all of the Saturn *Panzer Dragoon* titles. More recently, I was contracted specifically for the development of *Panzer Dragoon Orta.*

***XBN*: Where did the inspiration for the original Panzer Dragoon universe come from?**

Iwade: The original *Panzer Dragoon* world was largely created by a gentleman called Manabu Kusunoki, who can't be with us today [Kusunoki left Sega to join Artoon]. Based on his vision, we have tried to keep the original feeling through each of the games in the series, including this latest addition. What he created seven or eight years ago is still relevant and cutting edge today. So, that in itself is a great accomplishment, and every time it's been a great challenge to live up to it.

***XBN*: What would you say were the main influences, artistically?**

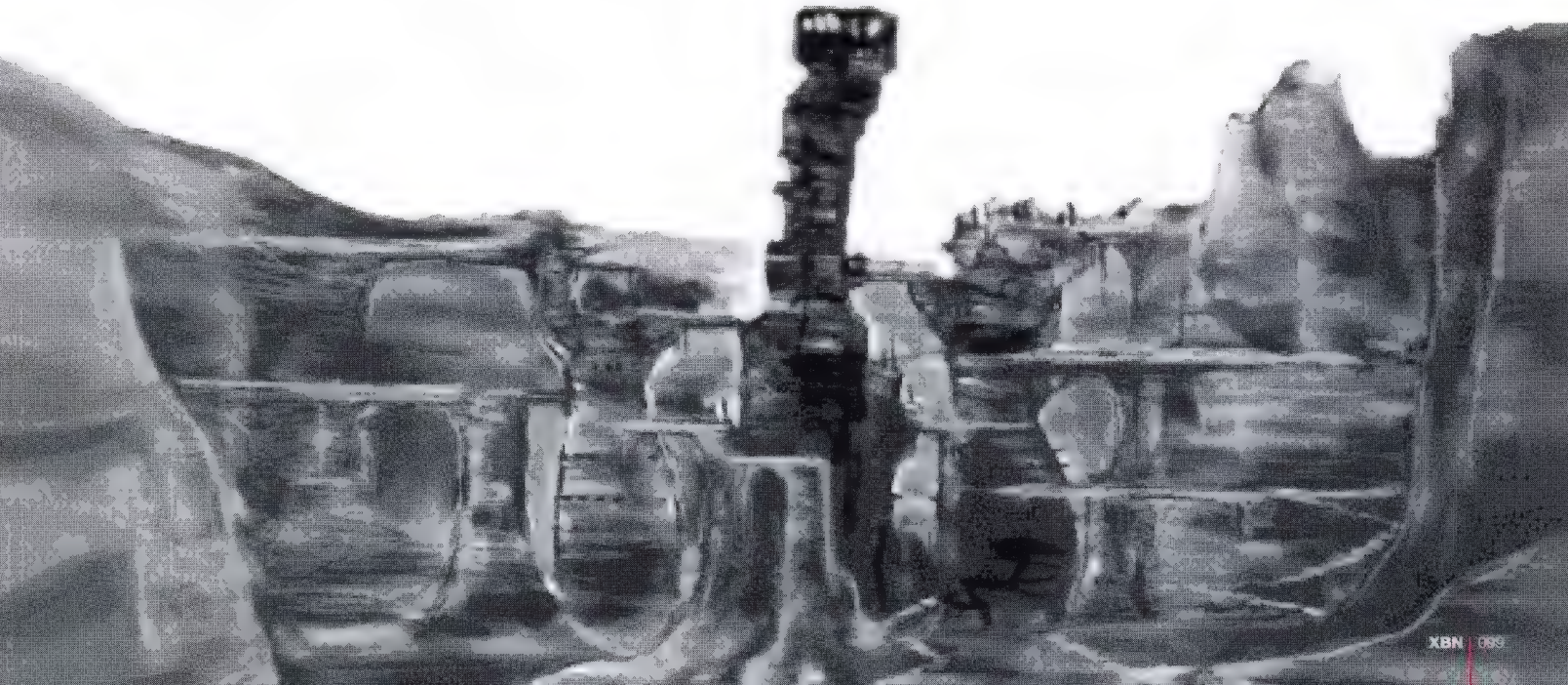
Iwade: There was nothing too specific, so I I would say that science fiction books and movies from the 1980s were probably the biggest influence. *Dune* and *Mad Max* are obvious examples.

***XBN*: How did the renowned French artist Moebius fit into the Panzer Dragoon creative process?**

Iwade: Back then the team members were big fans of Moebius, and what actually happened is that Sega developed all of the game's enemies and bosses, and sent them to Moebius, who had been commissioned to do some illustrative art. He interpreted the designs and the results became the cover art for the Japanese release.

Yoshida: As we were such big fans of Moebius, we were surprised with the results because they were not as abstract as we expected. It was very in keeping with the game.

■ Seeing the initial *Panzer* concept sketches, we're reminded of the popular phrase: "Preparation makes perfect...."



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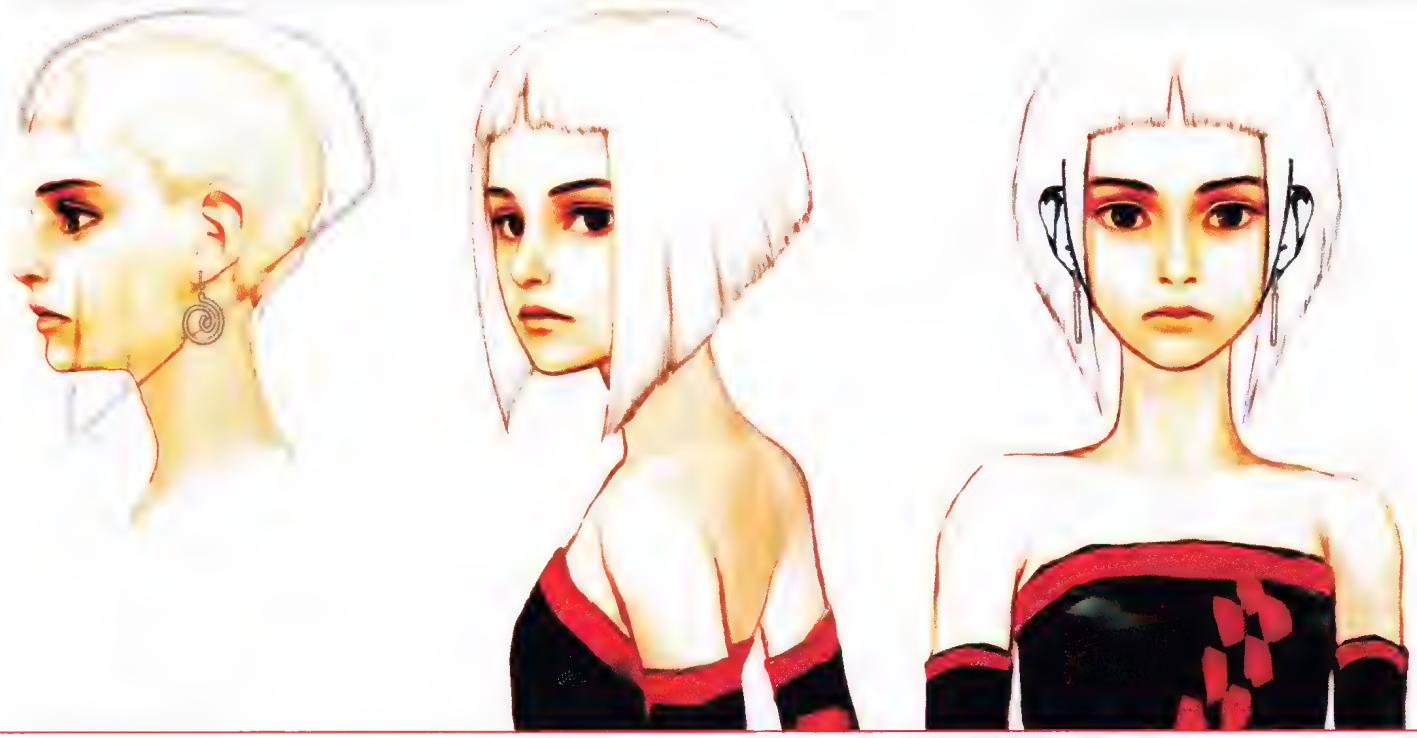


***XBN*: What was the main design challenge at that time?**

Iwade: When we first came up with the concept, the powers that be asked for a 3D shooting game for consumer software. They said, "We want a 3D shooter, we'll leave it up to you what it looks like." At the time you could play a shooting game in the arcade, but your 100 yen [roughly 82 cents] would buy you just three minutes. So there was no need to create a large, holistic world to coexist with. So that was the challenge—we had expertise in 3D shooting games, but it had to be adapted for the home.

***XBN*: Was there much internal debate deciding what kind of game *Orta* should be?**

Iwade: Designers will always approach things from a visual perspective, and planners will always come from a gameplay perspective, so there were certainly some differences of opinion. But it was decided early on that we would be creating a shooting game.

Yoshida: If we think about the progression in the series from the shooting action of *Panzer Dragoon* and *Panzer Dragoon Zwei*, to the RPG gameplay of *Panzer Dragoon Azel,* then *Orta* could be considered a combination of all three.

Because the series jumped straight to the Xbox, we thought this would **be the best chance we had to create a tangible fantasy reality.**

***XBN*: What are the main factors that have shaped the look of this latest installment?**

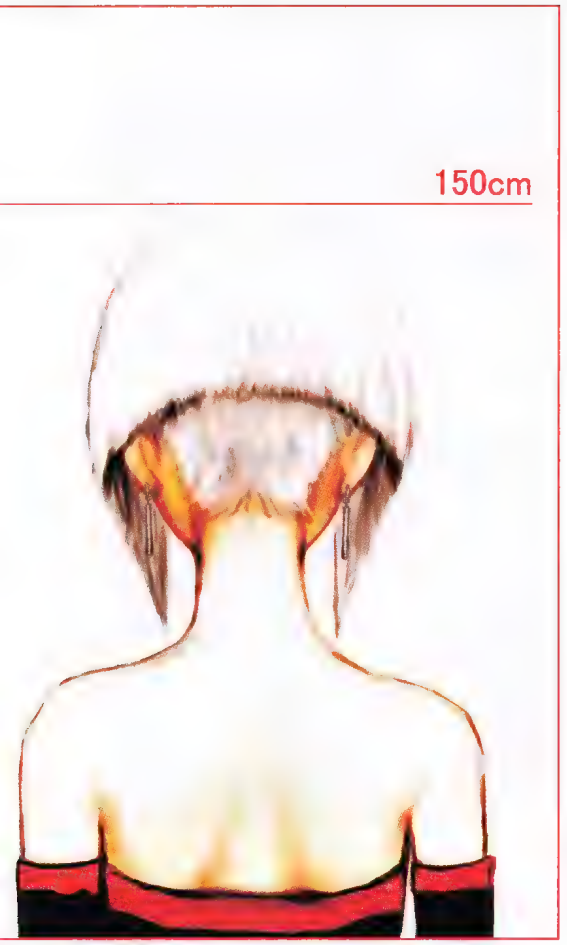
Iwade: I approached it from a technical perspective initially. My first thoughts were, what can we do with this game on Xbox that the other consoles couldn't? So we focused on an increased number of polygons, multitexturing, and designs to exploit the hardware.

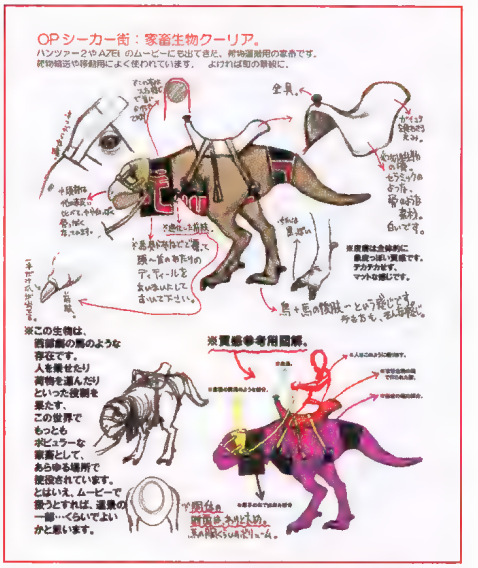
***XBN*: Was there not a temptation to use the power of Xbox to explore a new graphical approach for *Panzer Dragoon Orta*, like Smilebit did with *Jet Set Radio* and *Jet Set Radio Future*? A more abstract, artistic approach, for example, like a comic book?**

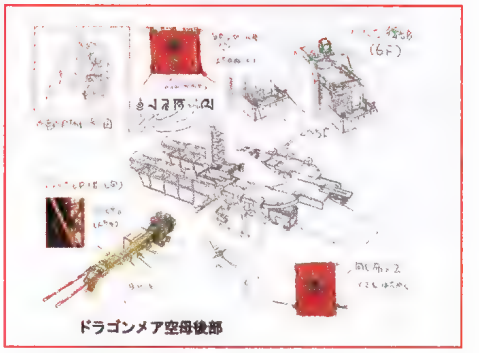
Iwade: The idea of a cartoon style did come forward for the *Orta* version of *Panzer Dragoon* and was kicked around by the team. But when the game started on Saturn, we were trying to express a reality on a 32-bit system—and we did the best we could for that system. Because the series jumped past Dreamcast and went straight to Xbox, we thought this would be best chance we had to create a tangible fantasy reality. Perhaps if we had created a *Panzer Dragoon* game on Dreamcast in a realistic style, then we may have gone for a cartoon-style approach for *Orta*.

***XBN*: It's funny how the original *Panzer Dragoon* games on Saturn still look great because those old texturing techniques look a little bit like today's cel-shading techniques....**

Yoshida: If you look at *Panzer Dragoon* 1 and 2, because of the limitations of Saturn in terms of memory and graphics, the world we created was almost pixel by pixel because we had a team of designers each working on each individual images—for example, we took photos of skin and transferred them to Saturn almost block by block. So we had a truly hand-made product. Now, we have more powerful technology but we don't have the time, and if we did it the same way we'd need such a huge team that it







would be totally impractical. So, in a way we've lost that hand-made feeling that the original games had.

***XBN*: What artistic accomplishment are you most proud of in the game?**

Iwade: Personally, the boss of stage 8. It has a nutty design and some very interesting movements.

Yoshida: Stage 3's sky has a very Japanese look, which I like. It's similar to a European sky, some might say.

***XBN*: Do you think there's too much emphasis placed on creating super-realistic graphics, and not enough on new, imaginative ways of displaying interactive art in recent videogames?**

Yoshida: If we take the market now and the acceptance of Xbox around the world, this hunt for reality has taken on a pace because there's so much you can do with the console. From a personal point of view, the kind of reality we're striving to create isn't real, it's fantasy. There are always cycles, though, and change will surely come at some point.

***XBN*: Do you see videogames as a medium for true artistic expression? Or do you think they are still too commercially driven for this to happen often?**

Iwade: In Japan, games often cost 6,800 yen [$56]. That's much more than you pay for a DVD film. It's a business. So you are buying a game, not an artistic experience. Of course, if the market changes and companies can release games for 2,000 yen [$16], with even small sell-through numbers turning a profit, then perhaps you would see more artistic approaches to creating games.

***XBN*: Are you hopeful that videogaming will eventually broaden enough so that artistic games can exist as a whole new subculture of gaming, like art-house films have for cinema?**

Iwade: In Japan, this market already exists. So many games come out it's inevitable that some of them do become underground cult hits.

***XBN*: So are you disappointed there won't be a bigger market to enjoy *Orta*?**

Iwade, Yoshida: Yes [*Both laugh*].

Yoshida: If you think about games that have been developed from a Japan standpoint, this time we were thinking globally the whole time we were making it, and in close contact with Xbox marketing in the United States. They pushed the release date back so they could have a better product, and we upped the quality as high as we could. It's a shame about the market here in Japan, but this is a global release.

***XBN*: Are you happy with the results of *Panzer Dragoon Orta*? How do you feel it aligns with what was created in the first three *Panzer Dragoon* titles?**

Iwade: The process was personally interesting from the perspective of a new role as chief designer. As one of the earliest Xbox games announced, I had an idea of where we wanted to be, and I think we got close. Of course, there were things that didn't make it into the final game that we wished could have been included, but overall, it got close to our original vision.

***XBN*: Which videogames or computer games have really inspired you creatively?**

Iwade: *Starblade*.

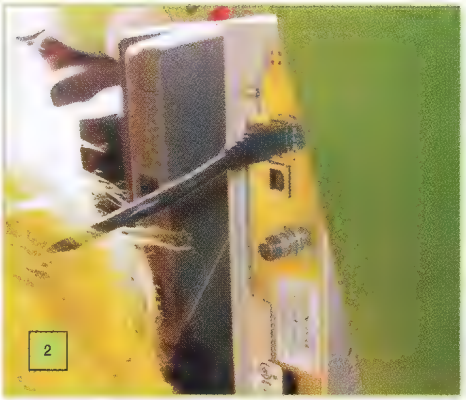
Yoshida: I don't really have a personal favorite, but my goal is always to create a virtual space for the player to lose themselves within.

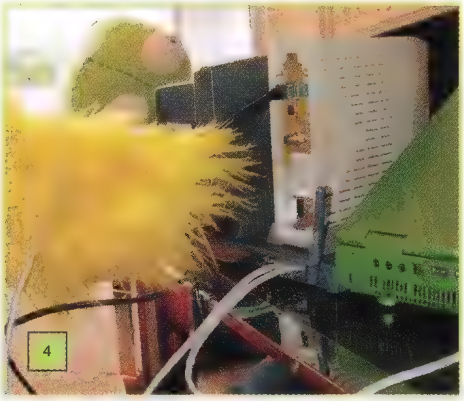
CUTTING THE CORD

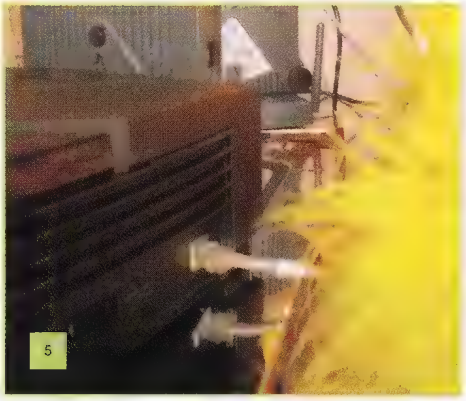
***XBN*'s newfound feathered mascot Technical Chicken shows you how to wirelessly network your home for broadband gaming goodness.**

A bloody nose. Severe head trauma. Death by extension cord. These injuries, while all seemingly related to high-rise construction work, are actually dangers lurking around your Xbox. But all the emergency-room drama can be avoided by following a few, simple steps to take your wired gaming network—spanning rooms, stairwells, and endless hallways—to a wireless state.

Actually, the worst cord-related wound you'll probably ever suffer from is a "toe-jam tangle" (definition: when a cable/DSL line catches in that space between your big toe and smaller appendages while walking barefoot), or maybe even a brutal trip. But either way you look at it, stringing a 100-foot broadband wire from your PC-centric bedroom all the way downstairs to your console-dominated living room isn't necessary. Face it: A black cord thumb-tacked to your ceiling isn't a pretty sight, so this field guide to the art of networking will make it effortless to eliminate that hideous jungle of fiber optics in your house and go wire-free—so easy, even a brainless, 6-foot tall yellow bird can do it.







1 Step One: Knowing your gear.
To eliminate those tangles, you'll need a small assortment of gadgets—and a budget of around $350. First, a router is integral to organizing your central networking hub (which is typically where your cable/DSL modem is located; for sake of example, that's probably in your bedroom next to your PC). Its primary function is just like that of a surge protector's, only for connectivity instead of power. A four-port router is ideal (ranging from $100 to $150 if you comb the Internet for deals), and picking a name brand like Linksys is suggested, as it can offer proper tech support if problems arise. Plus, it's possible that Xbox Live might not support a bottom-shelf brand...so choose wisely.

Second, and most vital, are two wireless bridges (Phonex's Neverwire 14 nodes are the most efficient and easiest to set up, with a pair of units costing $189). Each bridge is a self-contained send/receive device that branches off directly from your router. You can have up to 16 placed anywhere in your living space, so after your Xbox is online and ready to roar, the possibilities are endless—your kitchen, bathroom, or even that damp, moldy storage space in your basement could be upgraded into yet another gateway to the so-called "Internet." There's no software to install; it truly is as basic as plug-and-play. And just to play it safe, a few extra 3-foot Ethernet cords might come in handy.

2 Step Two: It Came From the Modem.
Make sure your Internet connection is active, and then snap an Ethernet cord into your broadband modem. Stretch that over to your router and plug it into the first port.

3 Step Three: Always be PC.
While it's turned off, insert another Ethernet cord into your souped-up computer and slide that into the second port on the router. Depending on your Internet service provider, you might also need to type in an IP address and other related info after switching your PC back on in order to establish a connection on that machine. However, this does not affect your Xbox's ability to get online—those IP settings should be detected automatically.

4 Step Four: Winding up for Wireless
After popping the wireless bridge into a power outlet in the wall (as surge protectors tend to slow down transmissions), extend an Ethernet cord from it to the third port in the router.

5 Step Five: Completing the Connection
Now, wander into your living room (or wherever your Xbox may be stationed) and plug another wireless bridge into the wall outlet. From there, one last Ethernet cable will do, completing the circuit between the Xbox and the bridge. With everything powered up, Xbox Live is just a few button mashes away.

With very little effort—and the brainpower equivalent to that of our giant bird friend—you too can eliminate a grotesque dependency on wires. There's no need to worry about gameplay blunders, either; lag is essentially nonexistent, with online games running as smoothly as if they were plugged directly into your modem. In less than an hour, wireless freedom can be yours. Cut that cord and revel in it.

Technical Chicken says

Recommended Wireless Bridges

Brand	Price (SRP*)
PhonexNeverWire14	$99 each / $189
D-Link D-Link Air DWL-810	$129 each
LinksysWireless Ethernet Bridge	$129 each

Recommended Router Manufacturers

Linksys	www.linksys.com
D-Link	www.dlink.com
Belkin	www.belkin.com
Netgear	www.netgear.com

What you need:

Router
Wireless Bridges
Extra Ethernet cables

Photographed products: Alienware Area 51 laptop ($2859, www.alienware.com); Phonex Neverwire 14 wireless bridges ($189 for two-pack, www.phonex.com); Belkin wireless cable/DSL gateway router ($149, www.belkin.com); Motorola SURFboard® cable modem (free with service, www.motorola.com); Xbox videogame console ($199, www.xbox.com); Xbox Live Communicator ($49.99 for a one-year subscription and unit, www.xbox.com)

SPIN

Things that go round and round

When you've killed every enemy in every videogame (and the respawn portals they rode in on), it's time to kick back and enjoy some quality passive experience

Pluxus *European Onion*

Swedish group Pluxus produces instrumental synth-pop clearly influenced by the videogames of their childhood. Known to sample old-school console games, Pluxus' latest release, *European Onion*, plops down surprisingly catchy riffs in the (dangerously close to oversaturated) retro-electronic genre. Less atmospheric than Boards of Canada and more humane than Kraftwerk, Pluxus' cheerful playground melodies are a combination of underwater flutes, electronic organs, a very old drum machine, and an NES. Who says electronic music has to be cold and arty? *Onion* is music for kids and kids at heart.

Gza *Legend of the Liquid Sword*

The Genius lives up to his name with a collection of expertly written songs, ranging in subject matter from a serial killer's rampage to the animal kingdom described in thug terminology. "Fame" uses the names of hundreds of celebrities to tell a story about life in the spotlight, similar to how "Labels" used record label names to describe the music industry. It's clever stuff, with lyrics like, "They were told not to ride in Patty's Hears(t) and stay out of Charles' Mans(i)on." The two tracks produced by Wu Tang compartiot RZA shine above most of the others, but the lyrics are consistently on point.

Talib Kweli *Quality*

The end of dos-double-oh-dos brings us Kweli's first-ever real-deal solo album, and without a doubt, it's the best work he's ever done. Long recognized as Mos Def's rhyme-partner in Black Star—a secondary role, if only because of Mos' comparatively high profile—*Quality* proves that the Brooklyn emcee can hold it down solo, without a shadow of a doubt. The man blends social consciousness with aggressive confidence, and the result is a record that's as smart as it is accessible, with the freshest of guest-spots (Cocoa Brovas, Bilal, Black Thought, and more) adding several dimensions of personality to the mix.

Beans *Tomorrow Right Now*

This is future rap. Hip-hop beats with loops ranging from electronic buzzes to simple four-note jazz riffs are torn apart by Beans' unique delivery—sometimes slow and full of pauses, other times a vast flow of words pouring from his mouth in a never-ending stream of multisyllabic fury. This is the first solo album from a member of the late, great Antipop Consortium; it's weird enough to win over any underground head, and accessible enough for anyone with a taste for hip-hop or electro. Beans is a master at making music that makes your head nod, and this is sure to get all the heads in the house open/opin.

Nightmares On Wax *Mind Elevation*

The niceness arrives with a side order of kicks and snares on the album both pot-smokers and critics alike are calling "The feel-good record of the year." This is playful, almost simplified instrumental hip-hop, tricked out with blunted drums and life-affirming vocal samples. Nightmares on Wax was a major influence in the early-90's British techno scene and nearly invented the genre now known as downtempo. *Elevation* is consistent with their sound (albeit with a bit more singing), and will keep heads lifted once again. Soulful, sun-lit music for those of us who normally melt under such warm conditions.

Godspeed You! Black Emperor *Yanqui U.X.O.*

The sleeve of Godspeed's latest album features a grainy video still of stainless steel bombs tumbling from the belly of an unknown bomber plane. It is a cold, pixilated snapshot of modern warfare that elicits both fear and awe, anger and guilt. Apt wallpaper for the droning, epic noisechestral bombast that is Godspeed's music. Produced by indie-rock deity Steve Albini, *U.X.O.* sees the band move away from overt political vocal samples and incidental ambience to focus purely on live instrumentation, building dynamics upon tension and release until the whole album melts in an incandescent sludge of white noise.

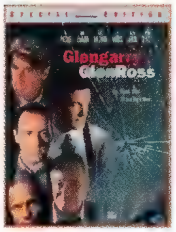
Avalon

In the vein of *The Matrix*, *eXistenz*, and other examples of Gibsonian virtual worlds, *Avalon* is a work that complicates the boundaries of the virtual and the real. By *Ghost in the Shell* director Mamoru Oshii, *Avalon* is a visually stunning work that blends live action, animation, and CG imagery into a high-tech game world. The film was shot in Poland, and it's odd to see Polish actors dubbed in Japanese with English subtitles; it does, however, manage to maintain its Japanese sensibilites. The fast camera work, emphasis on technology, and enigmatic subject matter are reminiscent of anime and Japanese action films. The film centers around a woman named Ash, an invincible solo gamer in the war-game *Avalon*. Ash plays though battlefields in hopes of finding her former lover, who has disappeared into the last level of the game. As she progresses, Ash must go against a player named Bishop to reveal the game's ultimate goal. While the subject matter is not terribly new, the visual style makes Avalon well worth checking out. If only our videogames looked this good.

Bang the Machine

The huge popularity of *Street Fighter 2* spawned a subculture of fanatics, sweat-inducing tournaments, and Capcom spin-offs, and was responsible for putting life back into the dying arcade. *Bang the Machine* is a fascinating documentary about the boys of the *Street Fighter* Tournament scene, which is as much about the gaming life as it is about machismo, suburbia, and "getting nexts." The documentary follows the *SF* crème de la crème from their suburban homes to the world championships in Japan. The filmmakers interview a range of tournament players, including an egotistical Vegas rapper, a bookish MIT student, and a humble Korean liquor store kid on why they play. One guy describes the feeling of victory as "better than sex," making his "pecks flare up." And the *SF* community is not without its own legends and drama; like hip hop, there is an East coast-West coast rivalry: boys get angry and settle it outside. *Bang the Machine* is truly a gem of a film, and is truly required gamer viewing.

Glenngary Glen Ross



"Coffee is for closers!" Either you sell in James Foley's world, or you get the F-out and make room for those who do. The leads are for salesmen, for machines. They are not for men. Check out Al "Whooah!" Pacino as Ricky Roma, a man so slick glue wouldn't stick to him. Watch Sheldon "The Machine" Levine played by Jack Lemmon as he attempts to muscle the marks into signing on the dotted line. It's desperation done deliciously, as an all-star cast winds its way through the story of mediocre men and the real estate they sell. The top salesman gets himself the Cadillac. Second place wins a set of steak knives. Third place and you can file for unemployment. A downpour falls upon the righteous and the creepy alike—and desperate men do desperate things when their jobs are on the line. Director Foley makes sure to show each man individually to hammer home the fact that they never really have conversations with their peers, that they are absolutely alone. This one's a classic, and the many bonus features are nice.

Y Tu Mama Tambien

What do you do when the object of your sexual desire turns out to be the wife of an ignorant older cousin? For Tenoch (Diego Luna) and his best friend Julio (Gael García Bernal from *Amores Perros*), this means asking Luisa out to a beach that doesn't exist. Along the way, friendships are strengthened and destroyed, mothers are insulted, and lives are changed. For all the hubbub raised over *Y Tu Mamá También*'s explicit sexual romps and brutal coming-of-age honesty, the film is much more than a horny teen road trip flick doused in tequila and hazy with herb. From director Alfonso Cuarón, whose previous work includes *Great Expectations* (1998), *Tu Mamá* is a primal cross-examination of Mexican society; an exploration of class, politics, and local color. Yet, even under layers of scintillating social insight, the film's narrative never loses its immediacy, nor do its characters ever become puppets in some pedantic tale of morals. *Y Tu Mamá También* is brimming with life.

Golden Boy, Vol. 1-5

Golden Boy is an ironic, subversive anime series that ran for a short stretch during the mid-'90s on Japanese television. The narrative follows Kintaro Oe, who has completed his law degree at Tokyo University and needs only to show up and collect it; instead, he chooses to move from town to town on his bike, acquiring a variety of temp jobs in each place he goes. Throughout his travels, Kintaro runs the vocational gamut, from computer programmer to noodle chef, swimming instructor to royal servant. What makes the work so infinitely watchable is the intelligence with which each and every scene is crafted. Its social commentary is directed primarily towards gender politics (particularly those of Japanese culture), but nothing is truly sacred; *Golden Boy*'s writing succeeds admirably, as its sharp, biting commentary makes this short-lived series the Japanese equivalent of *The Simpsons*. (And we are hardly overstating the case.) Combined with hilarious, expressive animation and voice acting, this is the good-time provider.

Shaolin Soccer

Strange things happen when you cross Shaolin martial arts and soccer: flying monks, soccer balls turning into fireballs, and a lightning-fast pastry chef who whips up dumplings with gong fu fervor. Anachro-nistic visuals and Hong Kong-brand slapstick make up *Shaolin Soccer*, the absurdist comedy available on an import all-region DVD. Stephan Chow plays Sing, a down-on-his-luck Shaolin monk blessed with the almightly "leg of steel." This ultimate weapon is discovered by former soccer coach and Chinese Pele "Golden Leg" Fung. Together they decide to form the ultimate soccer team and reunite Sing's former Shaolin brothers who since the monkhood have become a janitor, a stockbroker, and a check-out clerk. With over-the-top special effects and cross-cultural weirdness, *Shaolin Soccer* is the ultimate sports-glory film. Watch it for the hilarious *Matrix*-inspired "bullet time" with a soccer ball, as well as the souped-up wire tricks that make martial arts films so charming.

INBOX

XBN@ziffdavis.com

Last Issue...

Tomonobu Itagaki told us what entertainment is. "Let me tell you what entertainment is," he said. "Violence. Sex. Friendship. Death. Surprise. Betrayal. Dancing." Entertainment is also *Xbox Nation* #5, a strange exploration of the spritely and a refutation of the jejune. We reviewed 59 games, previewed BioWare's intriguing *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic,* and gave you, dear reader, both a *Batman* comic book and a Superman air-sickness bag. We interviewed both Hideo Kojima and Itagaki; decided that *Steel Battalion,* with its massive, room-choking controller was worth the $200 and the hernia; told you exactly what the Japanese thought of Bill Gates' Xbox; and brought you news of Namco's brilliant brawler *Soul Calibur II*. Truly, it was the issue of issues, and you are no doubt kicking yourself for not having bought 65 copies.

Now, we implore you to enjoy the lint-free and lemony-fresh smelling letters section. Or don't.

I have to take exception to the *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4* review in the latest *Xbox Nation*. You didn't once mention that the title supports 720p, and you even complained about its muddied, not-better-than-PS2 graphics. I'm sorry, but even my 70-year-old mom can tell the difference between it running on a PS2 and on the XBOX in 720p. You also omitted the 720p mode in *NBA 2K3* (although you did mention Progressive Scan).
Mike M. Farnsworth

Okay, was that before or after the part in the review where young Evan Shamoon, author of the review, wrote, "The Xbox version is noticeably sharper than its PlayStation 2 counterpart"?

And now, because it wouldn't be a letters section without a note from our good friend Scott Whitmore, here's a note from our good friend Scott Whitmore.

I am a huge fan of *Shenmue* and *Shenmue II*. With *Shenmue II* on Xbox, it's nice to have the English dialogue, but the voices sound so much more eloquent in Japanese. Why didn't they use the gold 9.4 DVDs and include the option for having Japanese voice with English subtitles? I know that I and a million other gamers/Japanese animation fans would have loved this option!

Improvements to this title were small. Camera thumbnails option and viewing filters? Come on AM2! Throw me more than just a bone here! I was expecting at least a 60fps update, but we are stuck at 30fps. No upgrade in textures or polygon count? This is an amazing Dreamcast game and a pure port to Xbox is just a waste.

The storyline is amazing, but the one flaw is the ending of Part 1 and Part 2. Both end in cliffhangers that are just too annoying to wait until Part 3! (I'd pay good money to read Yu Suzuki's rough draft of Chapters 5-17.)
Scott Whitmore

Well, you're in luck, Scott. *Xbox Nation* has gained exclusive access to Yu Suzuki's rough draft for *Shenmue*'s remaining chapters. Here's a brief excerpt:

Chapter Five: Have Ryo keep bandage on face. Make sure to include scene where Ryo must polish 1,625 shoes over a four-day period to learn what it means to be the most tortured man on the planet. Minigame ideas: screwing caps onto toothpaste tubes, sock-drawer arranging, shuffling for nickels. Also: Ryo should have to run around a city asking many, many strangers where he can find shirtless construction workers.

I'm in the middle of a life-changing decision. It's not marriage. Uh-Uh, not going to look for a new job. Nope, no missionary trips.

PlayStation 2 or Xbox is the question of the hour.

Please give me a few points as to why it should be Xbox. I should say online gaming will NOT be a factor, as I have no interest in that feature.

Sell me on the Xbox so I can keep reading your awesome magazine. How's that for sucking up?
Daryl Palmer

If you buy an Xbox, we won't have to send the goons over to punch you in the kidneys.

I am ashamed of *Xbox Nation*'s interview with **Mr. [Tomonobu] Itagaki** in issue five. Dan Abernathy

I am ashamed of *Xbox Nation*'s interview with Mr. Itagaki in issue five. Itagaki is a damn genius who makes excellent games for gamers (not anybody's daughter). Too many of the questions were below the belt and simply uncalled for, and I felt that the entire interview was an attack on Mr. Itagaki's character. Especially when the interviewer asked if he was "okay with sexualizing a 17-year-old." Kasumi is not a 17-year-old; she's a videogame character. Itagaki knows the direction videogames are going. Not the extreme violence of *Grand Theft Auto* or the naughtiness of *BMX XXX*, but with games the truly entice a player in a way that *Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball* is bound to do. This is fantasy gaming at it best. To insinuate that the man behind this great title is somehow pandering sexual content is absurd. I for one hope he achieves everything he wants to in *Beach Volleyball*, after all, nobody is going to be forced to dress a character in a way they don't want to see. It's about choices. The more choices in a game, the better it's going to be.
Dan Abernathy

***Xbox Nation* encourages its interviewers to ask tough questions. We're not interested in publishing interviews that aren't thoughtful, hard-edged, or humorous—and we think our Tomonobu Itagaki interview fits our criteria perfectly.**

Your points are perfectly valid and we agree with many of the things you wrote. That said, we're glad our interviewer had the guts to pose the questions he did.

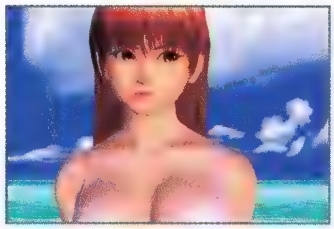
I'm a professional game artist and have a comment to share on behalf of myself and many of my peers. Skimming over your reviews, I notice an interesting trend. Game scores averaging between two to six out of 10 are more than common for the

majority of titles. Considering a game I worked on garnished a three out of 10 score, I have to agree with your reviews. Your comments on my game (embarrassing enough without mentioning its name), were dead-on.

I have some words for those upper management "know-it-alls" that hire talent based on low salary or those who fit into the "corporate culture." It seems talent is mediocre at best in the game world and leadership is lax at best. I've worked side by side with artists that had no traditional skills and leadership with no management skills. (One artist actually asked me what is two-point perspective.) To make a bad situation worse is when a company caps off salary leaving those who bust their ass getting the title finished and carrying the rest of the dead weight with that have no future with the company. I was disgusted to watch wonderfully talented artists walk out one by one as our team diminished and management just stood around with their thumbs up their asses in wonder. To add insult to injury, this company is now hiring talent straight from school to get cheap labor and more controllable egos. Fact is, I've seen so called pros with five or more years of experience turn out crap. I'm not bashing new talent, but who's going to mentor them? Those of us at the top of the pay scale with no chance of a raise now being asked to also train new recruits?
Which brings me to the heart of my comments: Quality and passionate game creation. You get what you pay for and until developers realize this and focus on quality and taking care of their teams, I'm afraid we are going to continue seeing these lower-than-average review scores. But we have an ace in the hole. If the savvy gamers make their purchases carefully and refuse to support the crap being turned out by the industry, the quality (and respect) will improve and everyone wins.
Anonymous

I know you are going to get complaints about the (8/10) for *Splinter Cell,* but I think the review is mostly legit. However, I do strongly disagree with the one of major complaints. The review states that "*Cell* is plagued with sloppy omissions. Why can't we skip cut-scenes?" I'm not sure. It must be because you forgot how to hit the A button! All of the cut-scenes can be skipped with a simple click of the trusty green button. Also, checkpoints occur after each cut-scene, so you never need to sit through them even if you forgot the A button "trick." It seems the sloppy omission was yours.

I also agree that *Metal Gear Solid 2: Substance* is one heck of a game. However, you forgot to mention the biggest problem: slowdowns. The content and general make up of *Solid 2* is A+. Unfortunately, there are slowdowns during almost all battles with explosions which includes most (if not all) of the boss battles. Many reviews have mentioned the problem in the rain, but it gets so much worse later in the game. It seems that developers squeezed every ounce of performance out of the PS2 but did not bother optimizing the engine for Xbox and it shows. The engine has simply been ported and not too well at that. I would still give it high marks for bonus material and some of the best gameplay in the business.
Dana Frost
Santa Rosa, CA


Sing it with us...*You're 16 (or so). You're beautiful...and you're mine!*

Perhaps we should have made our criticisms of *Splinter Cell* more clear, Dana. You are correct that it's possible to skip the FMVs inbetween missions by pressing the A button. What you cannot do, is skip the in-game cut-scenes where the guards chatter on endlessly and other plot revelations are made. The game's trial-and-error nature ensures these scenes will have to replayed time and time again.

With *Metal Gear Solid 2: Substance*, we do concede that the game slows down, especially on the tanker stage, and we have shot the offending reviewer out of a cannon for his omission. We stand by our score, however, as *Substance*'s story, gameplay, and wealth of extras ensures its greatness.

Mail of the moment

Xbox Nation encourages piracy

I received issue #5 today at my business, and I am disappointed again. On page 34 you are still informing people on mod chip and site information relating to those products. As I did with last issue #4, I TOOK THEM OFF THE SHELF. You should advise your writers not to publish these in the future because mod chips encourage people to pirate games. I have forwarded a copy of page 34 to Microsoft and we'll see what they say about it.
Marc

***Xbox Nation* does not encourage piracy in any way, shape, or form, unless you're talking about guys with wooden legs and eyepatches who like to bury treasure, make scurvy dogs walk the plank, and indulge in sweet, sweet grog. That said, we feel our readers deserve full and complete coverage of Xbox in all its forms, and do not regret our decision to publish such news.**

By the way, do you think publishing news stories on gun violence encourages people to go on shooting sprees?

Kids: If you have to be a pirate, be like Blackbeard, recruit a bunch of drunken sots to be your scurvy crew, raise the Jolly Roger, and go out plundering.

OUTBOX

Thus spake the monkeys....

"I think this is the first time in recorded history a magazine has come with a comic book and a vomit bag."
Editor Evan Shamoon cements *Xbox Nation*'s place in history.

"You need to eat some meat. Do it for me."
David Ziganay, our art director, imploring young Evan Shamoon to eat something besides tofu, avocado, tree bark, and rocks.

"Here are my notes. Between writing the first and second words of the title, I lost interest."
Writing makes Managing Editor Greg Orlando's brain hurt.

"That's a really good cookie. And I'm not even baked off my gourd. Hey, that's another quote!"
Ziganay enjoys the finer things in life.

"This game looks like an ass sandwich and we're all going to have to take a bite."
Orlando, yet again.

"If my hate for him were a river, it could not be forded. If my hate were a mountain, it could not be climbed. I hate him in life."
Do we really need to mention who said this? We thought not.

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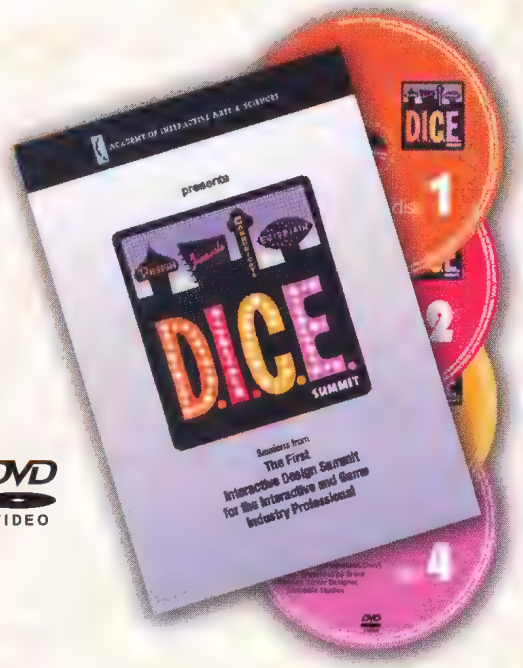

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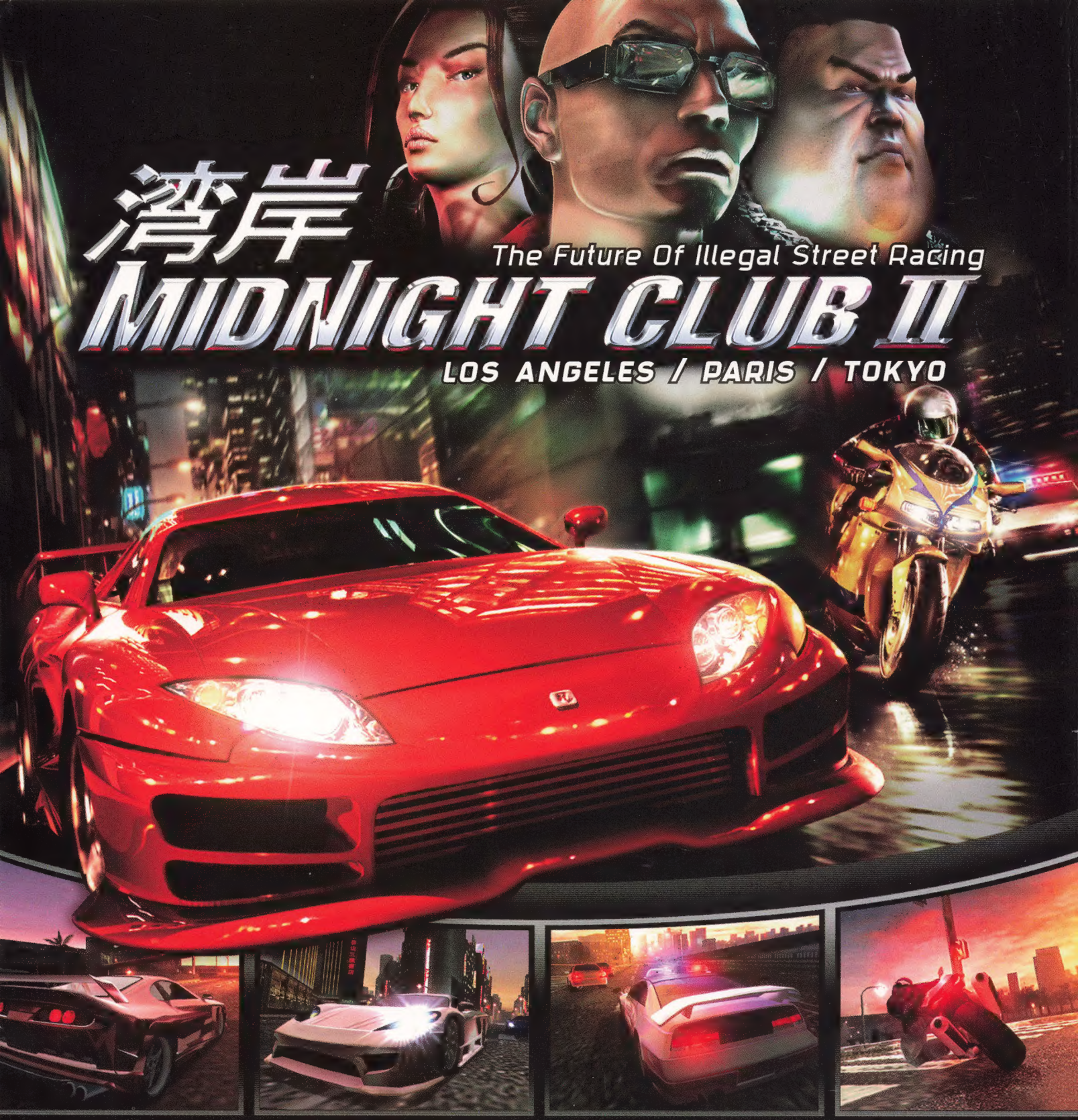

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